The third CAMP CRYSTAL LAKE novel

FRIDAY THE 13TH™

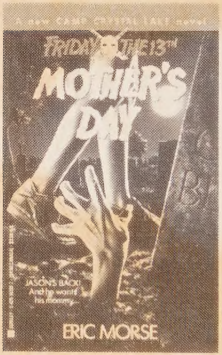
THE CARNIVAL

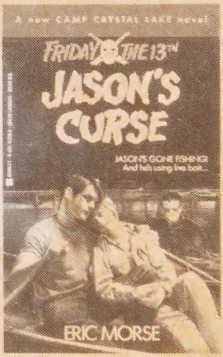
JASON'S ON A JOYRIDE!
It's a real scream...

ERIC MORSE

IT'S FRIDAY THE 13TH!

Jason's back—in a terrifying series of new CAMP CRYSTAL LAKE novels...





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—and she finds him—when a hockey mask rises up
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The Carnival

Step right up! A traveling carnival has come
to Crystal Lake. And the thrills turn to chills
—when Jason's spirit kills . . .

Road Trip (Coming in September 1994)

School spirit is put to the test—
when a van full of jocks and cheerleaders
meets the spirit of Jason Voorhees . . .

The FRIDAY THE 13TH Series by Eric Morse

MOTHER'S DAY
JASON'S CURSE
THE CARNIVAL

ROAD TRIP
(Coming in September!)

FRIDAY THE 13TH™

THE CARNIVAL

ERIC MORSE

BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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THE CARNIVAL

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1

Welcome to the Fun House

At ten-thirty on a warm June morning, a caravan of trucks rumbled through the tiny town of Crystal Lake. The large white trucks followed one after another like a parade of elephants. On the side of each truck was the same faded, red and blue lettering:

VINCE FANTANA'S
TRAVELLING FUN HOUSE AND CARNIVAL

And underneath that, printed in script, was the cheerful message:

"Yessirree, Folks. Here Comes the Carnival!"

Sure enough, right behind the trucks came a string of huge mobile homes and trailers, and strapped onto the trailers were the pieces of the amusement rides. Here were the cars for the Tilt-A-Whirl, the rusty metal arms for the Scrambler, the tracks and metal frames for the huge roller coaster known as the Monster. The parts of the rides looked like the broken limbs of giant robots.

The truck drivers had been instructed to blast their air horns as they drove through town. But despite the noise, the townspeople of the tiny backwoods village of Crystal Lake didn't come out of their houses to see who was arriving. The drivers didn't even see any curious faces peering out of windows.

Not a good sign, thought Mitch Deever, who was driving the fifth truck. Lazily, he moved a soggy toothpick from one side of his long, thin slash of a mouth to the other, and back again. Then he looked back down at the girly magazine, which he had spread open across the truck's steering wheel. And he honked the horn again, long and loud.

Chief mechanic for the travelling carnival, Mitch was a tall and powerful man in his late twenties. He wore his greasy black hair combed straight up and back. His wide sideburns angled far down his cheeks. Green and red tattoos covered his muscular arms, and he had knifed the sleeves of his T-shirt at the shoulder to show off the artwork. Snakes were his favorite design; their lifelike green bodies coiled and slithered all over the ropes of his thick muscles. But there were also daggers, skulls, hearts—and girls' names.

Mitch liked to boast that he had a tattoo for every girl in every town he'd ever made time with. Then he'd point out that there weren't too many blank spots left.

Sitting next to Mitch on the seat was Stump,

his large, powerful rottweiler. Mitch had given the dog his name because he had bobbed the dog's tail himself. The dog was resting his square head on the thigh of Mitch's grimy black work pants. And when Mitch unfolded one of the larger pictures in his magazine, the dog opened one dark brown eye, as if he too were interested in the photo. Mitch cackled and slapped the dog hard on the back.

But where the hell were they going? The long line of trucks was bouncing over dirt roads now, roads that seemed to lead further and further into the dark woods. Mitch cursed.

It hadn't been a good year for the carnival. In April, in Jesup, Georgia, a kid had fallen off the Ferris wheel. The operator had been drunk and had forgotten to check that all the passengers' safety bars were latched in place. The girl had broken a leg, and Vince Fantana, the owner, had lost his insurance. Since then, Fantana had had to change the carnival's entire schedule. He had to schedule fair dates in more and more remote places where the carnival's reputation wasn't known.

But *this* . . .

The dirt road they were now driving on wasn't much more than a logging trail. Mitch couldn't see through the thick, green woods that pressed against the truck on either side. Then he spotted an old, wooden sign planted in the overgrown weeds.

WELCOME TO CAMP CRYSTAL LAKE read the

carved letters in the dark wood.

Somehow the sign didn't make Mitch feel welcome. It seemed more like a grave marker. Mitch spat out the window as they drove by.

It was a gloomy, overcast day. The dark sky made everything—even the green trees—look gray. On his left, through the trees, Mitch started catching glimpses of a vast lake. Not a soul in sight. No one swimming, fishing, boating—nothing. Mitch couldn't blame the locals for avoiding the place. There was something ugly about that lake.

Then the trucks were turning right, into a wide open field of overgrown grass and weeds. Trucks were parking. Vince Fantana, that nasty old gopher, was strutting around with his walkie-talkie, barking orders.

So this was it. This was the site.

It would be the carny workers' job to turn this godforsaken hellhole into a festive fairgrounds.

Mitch jumped down from the cab of the truck and held the door open for Stump. The dog leaped out and bounded around, sniffing and peeing everywhere, marking the place as his own.

"Hey, Deever!" One of the lot supervisors was yelling at him. "Over here."

Mitch stretched, taking his sweet time. He cracked his knuckles, then his back. He bit the end of his toothpick, making the little stick go end over end in his large mouth. Then he spat it into the grass.

After all his years in the carnival biz, Mitch knew the fair's set-up routine by heart.

His first job would be setting up the ride they called the House of Death.

2

Maxi

Thirty miles away, in the town of Holloway, Massachusetts . . .

Three girls were walking tightrope style along the narrow curb on Porter Avenue.

Porter Avenue was a straight, two-lane blacktop that connected Holloway with Cranville, Hawthorn, Crystal Lake, and other nearby towns. Along this particular stretch of road, there was nothing much to look at except a few auto body shops and lots of grass. So the drivers of the passing cars could be forgiven if their heads turned sharply to watch the girls.

It was the girl who was leading who caught their eye.

Maxi Wagner (her full name was Maxine but nobody who knew her even slightly called her that) was seventeen and tall and thin. She had shoulder-length dark hair, large, dark eyes, and long legs that seemed to go all the way up to her head. She moved with the grace of a deer.

Maxi's long arms teetered, and she stepped off the curb into the street. A pickup truck

was speeding toward them. Maxi stuck out her thumb. As the truck whizzed by, she caught a glimpse of the heavyset driver, glaring at her with cold, dark eyes. Despite the heat, she shivered.

"Are you crazy?"

Maxi turned. Her short friend Wendy was glaring at her, hands on wide hips.

"What are you sticking out your thumb for? I mean, what if he stops?"

"Then we get a ride," Maxi said. Her voice was so low and sultry that from time to time girls accused her of faking it, just to act sexy. It wasn't true. It was her natural voice.

"A ride?" Wendy wailed. "He wasn't even going our way!"

"So? What's so great about where we're going?"

It was Monday morning, the beginning of another dreary week of summer school at Harriet C. Carson Community College. Since they had a long gap between math and English classes, Maxi had insisted that her friends Wendy and KC go into town with her to get ice cream floats at Woolworth's and shop for makeup. The various pockets of Maxi's white painter pants were now crammed with Maybelline Indigo Blue eyeliner, strawberry and pink-bubblegum lip gloss, cover stick, Cover Girl foundation, black nail polish, and a tube of Desert Sand blush—none of which she'd paid for.

Maxi was an only child. Her dad was the president of a small but highly successful computer company. He gave Maxi enough money to buy

anything she wanted. But that was no fun. That's why she always shoplifted. Only trouble was, she never got caught. That was no fun either.

"Wendy's right," KC said softly.

The pretty ash blonde was standing between Maxi and Wendy, her weight shifted to one foot; she was smiling shyly at Maxi. That was one of the many annoying things about KC, thought Maxi. She smiled even when she was saying something critical. "You shouldn't hitch," KC said.

"I know," agreed Maxi. "That's why I do it so much."

She picked up a stick and rapped it against a telephone pole. There was a colorful poster stapled to the pole's dark wood. Maxi glanced at it. "Carnival," she said flatly.

She couldn't think of anything less exciting. She started to walk on, but KC said, "A carnival?" She clapped her hands. "I love carnivals. Hey, guys, why don't we go? You want to go?"

"Gag me with a spoon," Maxi said.

As far as Maxi was concerned, Katherine "KC" Carter was probably one of the sweetest, most polite girls in the history of the entire world. She wondered why she stayed friends with her. KC got interested and excited by just about everything. If a killer told KC he was going to shoot her, she'd probably say, "Cool. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"When's the fair, Wens?" KC asked. "Did we miss it?"

Wendy leaned forward, fingertips jammed in her jeans' front pockets, and studied the poster up close.

"Guys," Maxi said, "c'monnnnn. I'm sweating bullets here."

"I just want to know when it is," KC said, wrinkling her pert nose in an expression Maxi had told her more than once made her look like a gerbil. "Wens?" KC asked again.

Wendy was squinting at the poster. Wendy worked out about an hour a day and didn't have an extra ounce of fat on her, but because of her body shape she still ended up looking like a pear. With her pug nose, big apple cheeks, and the acne on her forehead, Wendy was not what anyone would call a looker. As a result, she was always worried about her appearance, and she refused to wear her glasses. To read, she had to hold things right up to her eyes. "It starts this weekend," she said finally. "Complete with fireworks for the Fourth of July."

"Really? Cool!" KC said. She gave Maxi a questioning grin. "What do you say? A little carnival action?"

"The D-word," Maxi said.

KC squinted at Maxi. "Delightful?" she guessed. "Daring? Delicious?"

"Dull," Maxi said. "C'mon."

"Wait a minute," Wendy said, peering at the poster once more. "Oh, wow. You're right. Forget it." Frowning, she started to walk down the street again.

"What's wrong?" KC asked her.

"Nothing."

"Wens! What?!"

"The carnival's being held in Crystal Lake."

"Oh God!"

Maxi, who'd been walking up ahead, now turned and walked backwards a few steps. "Really?" She couldn't help it; her pretty, red lips curled upward in a smile.

"Look at her," Wendy said, shaking her head. "*Now* she's interested. Listen, Maxi, let me tell you something right now so we have it on record and there's no mistake about it later. I'm not going to that carnival. Not in a million years. Okay? So don't waste your breath."

Maxi laughed. "I just said we weren't going."

"I know. But I could tell what you were thinking. You were thinking we were going."

"No way," Maxi said. "It's going to be the B-word."

"Beautiful?" guessed KC, who loved this game, but was never any good at it.

"Boring," Maxi said. "Besides, I'm sure we can find something better to do on a Friday night." Maxi made an obscene gesture to indicate something better to do on a Friday night.

"I agree a million percent," Wendy said, visibly relieved. "A carnival is the last thing we ought to do."

Both Wendy and KC were sixteen, one year younger than Maxi. They were only in the same class because Maxi had gotten kicked out of

school for smoking dope in the bathroom in the ninth grade. Though she was only one year older than her friends, most of the time it felt more like ten years. "Look at you," Maxi told Wendy. She clucked her tongue. "You're such a coward."

"That's right. But I'm an *alive* coward. And I'd like to live to be an old coward someday."

Maxi shook her head. Most kids in Holloway were scared witless at the mere mention of Crystal Lake. Not Maxi. She loved living so close to the famous town. Crystal Lake, murder capital of the world.

A number of years ago, a boy named Jason Voorhees had drowned in the lake because of the carelessness of some camp counselors. Ever since then, the place has been cursed. Every horrible thing that could happen—from a hunting accident to a maniac going on a wild killing spree—happened in Crystal Lake.

Out for revenge for her son's death, Jason's crazy mom had been the first killer. But folks believed that it was Jason himself who caused the rest of the trouble. They said that the dead boy kept coming back from the grave. They said that Jason was all grown now, that he wore a white hockey mask to hide his rotted face. They said Jason wanted revenge.

All pretty silly, as far as Maxi was concerned. But when things got really tedious around Holloway—which was pretty much all the time—she liked to go sightseeing, as she called it, around the infamous lake.

To tell the truth, there was nothing to see besides some old, rundown cabins. But afterwards, whenever she told her mom where she'd been, Mrs. Wagner had a hissy fit. And then her mom would tell her dad.

Who wouldn't do a thing.

The mere thought of her father released a bitter bile in Maxi's stomach. It literally gave her a bad taste in her mouth, and she hawked and spat.

"Gross!" KC cried. "Maxi!"

"Hey, you know what Jesse Kramer told me about Crystal Lake?" Maxi asked.

"I don't want to hear it," Wendy said.

"He heard it's like the Devil's gateway. That if you dig down deep enough anywhere around there, this invisible vapor starts seeping up out of the ground." Maxi waggled her fingers to indicate fumes. "The vapor turns you meaner and nastier, the longer you breathe it in. And if—"

"Okay, okay," KC pleaded. "That's enough. I'm getting the willies."

"There's more," Maxi said happily. "Billy Robbins says that Jason's mask is buried somewhere around Crystal Lake and whoever puts it on—"

Instead of finishing her sentence, Maxi suddenly turned her face into a mask of rage and whirled on Wendy and KC. Both girls shrieked. Wendy dodged out into the road; a passing car honked her back to the curb as it screamed by.

Maxi laughed. She was strolling past another telephone pole, and another carnival poster. She

reached out one long arm and ripped the poster down without breaking stride.

"Maxi!" KC said, shocked. "Someone went to a lot of trouble to put that up."

Maxi snorted.

Wendy was frowning, her red eyebrows knitted together. "If you're taking that thing because you think we're going to the carnival," she said, "I swear to you, Maxi. I'm not—"

"I just like the colors," Maxi interrupted. She wasn't even looking at the poster in her hand. She flapped it against her thigh as she walked.

Wendy was sweating heavily now from the fast pace they were setting. She looked up at Maxi, who grinned and slapped the poster down on her head. "The S-word," Maxi said.

"Silly?" guessed KC.

"Scaredy-cat."

"I'm not going," Wendy repeated grimly.

Maxi only nodded.

3

Backbreaking

There were over forty men and women travelling with Vince Fantana's carnival. The workers were divided into three basic groups. 1) Concessionaires. These were the people who ran the games and sold the balloons and other junk. 2) Food. This meant the people who sold the caramel corn and the candy apples and the frozen bananas and everything else the kids puked up on the roller coaster. And 3) Rides. Mitch was in the rides group. But during setup it didn't matter what group you were in: Everyone was in the backbreaking group.

To set up the biggest rides, such as the Monster, they used the big crane. But the smaller rides and the kiddy rides were put together using only the muscle power of the crew. As if they weren't working hard enough already, the carnies had to dig deep foundations for some of the bigger rides, and they had to drill post holes for the Cyclone fence.

The fence encircled the entire fairgrounds. That way, everyone who came to the fair had

to come through the entrance gate and pay their five dollar entrance fee. Then they could purchase their ride tickets.

Fence or no fence, there were usually loads of kids who climbed over each night and got in for free. But this time, Vince wasn't kidding around. He'd gotten one of those electric fences that farmers used to keep their cattle from wandering off their land. Any kid who tried to get a free admission was going to get a free zap.

All week, Vince kept pushing everyone hard. This weekend was the July Fourth blowout, he constantly reminded them. He was counting on a big turnout, and he desperately needed the fair to be ready. So all week, the woods of Crystal Lake resounded with sawing, banging, hammering, shouting, cursing, and . . .

It was a strange thing. The longer they spent at Crystal Lake, the nastier the carny workers became. It was like there was something in the air around here, thought Mitch. The weather sure seemed nasty, with a humidity that clung to your skin like some evil creature's hot breath. Mitch found he was sweating hard even when he was standing still.

But despite the heat and all the bickering, the crew still finished setting up the fair by late Thursday night, right on schedule. As most of the carnies headed for bed, Mitch strolled through the fairgrounds. All the rides and booths were now in place. The trees were strung with lights. And Vince had the honky-tonk organ-grinder

muzak going, to get everyone in the mood.

Mitch had to admit it. The place was starting to look pretty good. Now all they needed were some customers.

And some pretty teenage girls for Mitch.

Then they'd be ready to rock and roll.

4

Go Fetch

When the phone rang on Thursday night, Maxi didn't move.

Naked, she was sitting on the edge of her bed, pressing a cold can of beer against her forehead. Without putting the beer down, she bent to pick up the receiver.

"Yeah?"

A familiar voice said, "Just a second." Then there was all this rustling, followed by clicking sounds, static. And then the Pearl Jam song "Go" started blasting over the line.

"Maxi?"

"Yeah?"

"You hear the music?"

"Uh-huh!" She was practically shouting.

"Good! Oh, uh, this is Greg, by the way."

"I know!"

Greg Dillon was a senior from the nearby town of Hawthorn who was enrolled in Maxi's summer school. The guy had been mad about her since the first week of classes. He was always

pulling these crazy romantic stunts. Like playing his electric guitar right outside her window at her parents' house late one night and crooning his own rendition of the reggae hit, "Maxi." The only trouble was, it wasn't Maxi's window. It was her parents' window. Her father was not amused. Which was the first thing that had really endeared Greg to Maxi.

She had grown even fonder of him over the last month. She was sorry she didn't feel something more. Not only was the guy a real sweetheart, he was also a sad case. His parents had both died in a car crash the day after his thirteenth birthday.

"So listen!" yelled Greg. "You want to know why I'm playing this music? See, I have this theory. Did you ever—"

"Greg—"

"Wait, just let me finish."

"Okay, but could you turn the music down a little? I'm having a kind of hard time hearing what you're—"

"Oh, yeah, hold on. There. Better? Anyway, did you ever think about why movies are always so romantic? I've got it figured. It's because of the music. See, whenever anyone in the movies says something romantic, it sounds great because there's all this music behind it. But in real life, if you say the same things you sound like a dork, am I right? Of course I'm right."

"So you're doing your own soundtrack?" Maxi asked.

"Right! Oh, hey, by the way, am I calling too late?"

Maxi glanced at the clock. It was after midnight. "Yeah, you are, but it's too hot to sleep, so you're okay."

"Oh. Good." A nervous chuckle. "So how are you? I mean, I haven't seen you in like hours."

"I'm fine. I think I'm sweating to death is all."

Greg laughed some more. Maxi popped the top on the beer and took a swig. "Okay," Greg said, "so here's what I called to talk to you about. . . . Uh, excuse me." He cleared his throat several times. "Th-there's a carnival in town," he said at last. He was losing his voice.

Maxi glanced around her dorm room. It was a small single, with dark wainscoting that went halfway up the walls. The rest of the walls were bare plaster, which was painted an ugly, institutional yellow. Unlike KC and Wendy, Maxi had insisted that her dad foot the bill for her to stay on campus this summer so she could get away from her house, which made her insane. But even though she had spent as much time as possible in her dorm, she had done nothing to decorate the room. There were no curtains. And no posters. Until now. The ripped carnival poster was thumbtacked right into the plaster (against dorm rules) in the center of the room.

"Yeah, I know about the carnival," Maxi said gently. She also knew where this was all leading now, and wished she could head him off, or

at least find some way to let him down gently. "Greg—"

"And . . . and . . . I was wondering if maybe . . ."

"Greg, listen—"

"Would you go with me, Maxi?"

Maxi sighed. "Um . . . when?"

Greg seemed to be getting more and more nervous as he went along. "T-tonight? I mean—what am I saying?—*tomorrow* night. Tomorrow night."

Maxi frowned. "Greg, I'd really love to go, but the thing is, I promised my girlfriends we'd—" She stopped short. If she told him about the party at Jeff McGuinn's tomorrow night, he'd invite himself. Or just show up. "I can't," she said. "Sorry."

Even over the phone, Maxi could feel Greg's intense disappointment; it made her hot skin prickle. Most of the time she walked around with a feeling of disappointment as hard as a rock. The thought of disappointing someone else made her feel even worse.

"Okay, sure," he said dejectedly. "You know, maybe some other time or something. Whatever."

Maxi bit her lip. "Yeah, definitely," she lied.

She stretched out on the bed. The pillow was damp with her sweat. "Listen, Greg?"

"Uh-huh?"

She paused, wondering if what she was about to say would help Greg or only make things worse.

She couldn't decide. The hell with it. "Can I say something here?" she said abruptly. "Greg? Give up on me, okay?"

Now the silence on the other end was electric.

"I'm not worth it, I swear. For one thing, I'm sad pretty much all the time. I'm like this big downer, and I couldn't even tell you why." That was another lie. She knew what she was down about. The P-word. Her parents. But she wasn't about to get into that now. She rushed on. "I mean, I get so down that I'm mean to everybody, even my best friends, just as a way of passing time, know what I mean?"

There was no response.

"Hello?"

"They've got the largest travelling roller coaster in the world," Greg said. "And there's going to be fireworks."

"Yeah, well whoop-de-do," Maxi said. She was sorry she said that, right after she said it, but then of course it was too late. She sat up again. "See what I mean? I'm a lousy person, I swear to you. Anyway, I probably should get off because—"

"I thought you were such a daredevil," Greg said slyly. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a little excitement. What? You're scared of a few rides?"

Maxi laughed. As Greg knew, Maxi loved and craved thrills and chills. Like the time she was playing Truth or Dare—her favorite game—with KC, Wendy, and a bunch of guys and somebody

dared Maxi to drive into town blindfolded. She did it, of course. Not all the way into town. She totaled her shiny, new Lexus (a birthday present from her dad) about halfway down the block, smashing it into an oak tree. That was the maddest she'd ever seen her dad. It was wonderful.

Anyway, compared to stunts like that, a carnival seemed like so much kiddy crap. Way too safe to be exciting.

"I haven't been to a carnival since my mom and dad took me," Greg said. "I've always promised myself that I'd go back and . . ."

He trailed off. Maxi couldn't think of anything to say. Greg had never talked to her about losing his parents, and she had never asked. She was suddenly terrified he was going to start weeping and spilling his guts out.

"Look, Greg, I guess I better—"

"Okay," he cut her off, "I'm going to ask you one more time, and that's it. Will you go with me?"

Maxi tried to make her deep voice sound as kind and light as she could. "I told you, I'm committed."

Which was true. Besides, the party was going to be awesome. Jeff's parents were going away on vacation. They'd have the whole house to themselves.

"Well," Greg said grimly. "*I'm* going to the carnival."

Though gestures were wasted in phone conversations, Maxi shrugged. "Suit yourself." It came out colder than she had intended.

After she hung up, she felt even lower than before. Because now she figured she had gotten Greg as depressed as she was.

Maybe she *should* bag the party and go to the carnival.

At least that way *somebody* would be happy.

After all, it was just one date.

One date wouldn't kill her.

Mitch sat on the steps of his trailer, trying to cool off and unwind. His ripped, black Fantana's Fun House T-shirt was drenched with sweat. He had a bottle of beer in his hand. It was his fifth. He opened it, spat the top into the grass, and took an endless swig. He watched cross-eyed as the amber liquid foamed and bucked, struggling to get out of the bottle and down his gullet.

Mitch had parked his van in the first clearing, the one that was ringed with a horseshoe of cabins, right at the entrance to the old Crystal Lake campsite. He wasn't the only one who had chosen this spot. The field was filled with vans, and some of the carnies were bunking down in the cabins themselves.

It was after one in the morning. There wasn't a sound except for the creepers and the peepers chirping in the woods. There wasn't any light except for the ravaged face of the old moon, staring down. Probably everyone in the carnival was asleep, except for Mitch. And maybe except for . . .

He whistled. There was a rustling in the brush

as Stump bounded out of the darkness. Stump was a big dog, built almost like a butcher-block table. The dog ran straight at him. Snarling, he leaped at Mitch's throat.

Mitch knocked the dog's head to the side with the back of his arm. Stump closed his sharp white teeth around his forearm, biting a little harder than he usually did when they played. Mitch swore, yanking his arm away. Even Stump was in a bad mood, he thought. Which was kind of a scary thing. The dog's jaws were so powerful, he could tear a man's guts out without breaking a sweat.

He found a stick on the ground and held it up for the dog to see. Stump bared his teeth as if the stick were his mortal enemy. He lunged.

Mitch stood fast, raising the stick up high before Stump could get it. But Stump leaped straight off the ground. Mitch swung the stick away from the dog's snapping jaws. Then he turned and threw the stick as hard as he could.

It landed right in front of the center cabin. Stump turned around to chase the stick, turning so hard he fell. He scrambled back to his feet and raced off into the darkness.

Go fetch, thought Mitch sourly.

Then he tossed his empty beer bottle into the grass and went inside. He had a little trouble taking off his T-shirt, so he just ripped it off his body instead. He flopped down on the narrow bed. But he didn't feel like sleeping. He was

feeling that bored feeling again, the one that could only be calmed by the company of pretty young girls.

Or by . . .

He got up and sat down at the tiny fold-down Formica kitchen table. He took a switchblade with a glossy red handle out of his back pocket. He popped open the sharp shiny knife. Then he placed his right hand down on the table, carefully spreading the fingers as wide as they would go.

He started poking the point of the blade in the spaces between his fingers, moving left to right, and back again. Faster. Faster. Until the knife point made a satisfying clickety-clickety sound, like the carnival's big spinning wheels of chance where people lost hundreds of dollars trying to win stuffed dolls that cost Fantana five bucks apiece.

Mitch had been doing this knife trick for years and had never cut himself. But it was dark in the van and he had to strain to see his fingers. Across the backs of his fingers green tattooed letters spelled out I DARE YOU. Mitch could never resist a dare, even from himself. He went faster.

And then he dared himself to try an even harder stunt. He dared himself to close his eyes. Just for an instant.

When he opened his eyes again, the knife was sticking out of the A in DARE.

He swore. Then he pulled the blade out and

got up to look for his first aid kid. And after he had managed to stop the bleeding and get the finger bandaged, he went back to doing the knife trick again. He grinned slyly. This time he got the knife all the way across his hand with his eyes closed.

It was only then that he remembered Stump. He went outside and stood on the steps of the van, whistling softly.

The dog didn't come.

Then Mitch saw the pile of dirt.

In front of the center cabin, where he had thrown the stick, there was a large pile of black earth and little clouds of dirt kept flying up out of the ground, adding to the pile.

What was Stump into now?

Mitch started down the steps. He didn't get far. Because just then he heard the dog's padding footsteps. The dog's sleek black and brown coat hid it in the shadows. He didn't see it until it was almost upon him.

Mitch tensed, stepping backward. Perhaps sensing the man's fear, Stump stopped short as well, only a few yards away.

Stump was staring up at his master, his large brown eyes gleaming. Hanging from the dog's mouth was what appeared to be a white mask, like the kind hockey goalies wore. Mitch didn't know why, but the sight of the mask made his blood start to pound. It was as if he could see the thick red liquid inside his own body, see it pumping in and out of his heart and flooding his chest.

The dog's eyes stayed locked on Mitch's for a moment.

Then he trotted forward and dropped the mask at his master's feet.

5

Bad Vibes

Bzzzz . . .

Early Friday morning. At Crystal Lake, no one was up except the mosquitoes, one of which was buzzing around the electric fence that circled the fairgrounds and—

Snap!

There was a loud cracking sound as the bug flew too close to the metal links. Like an electronic bug trap, the fence zapped the bug.

Maxi opened her eyes, staring up at the ceiling of her dorm room.

That's odd, she thought; she didn't usually sleep on her back.

She yawned luxuriously. Then smiled. She must have fallen asleep holding hands with the man beside her, because she could still feel his large strong fingers interlaced with hers and—

Her heart seized midbeat.

The man beside her?!

She jerked her head to her left and found

herself staring straight into Jason Voorhees's white-masked face.

She started to scream as the long, shiny blade plunged down again and again and—

Maxi woke up with a loud gasp. She sat bolt upright, her chest heaving. She had to say the words aloud, "Just a dream." Then she started to laugh.

She turned to look at her tiny digital alarm clock just as the 5:59 flipped over into 6:00 A.M.

Wow, early. She knew she wasn't going back to sleep, either. Not after that nightmare.

Friday afternoon at the Crystal Lake campsite . . .

Selena Tokar, the Gypsy fortune-teller's teenage daughter, was strolling past a row of trailers, heading for the center cabin, which she and her mom were sharing.

She had just taken a dunk in the lake. The water was shockingly cold, considering the intense summer heat. But she felt better for having had the swim, refreshed and chipper, better than she'd felt since they arrived. Maybe this place wasn't as gloomy and awful as she thought.

Then she saw the dog.

It was Mitch's dog, Stump. He was pawing and whimpering at the door to Mitch's van.

There was something mournful and desperate about the way the animal was whining—

more like a crying child than a dog. She started toward the dog, then hesitated.

Selena was a tall seventeen-year-old with frizzy, dark hair which she wore pulled back tightly in a thick ponytail. She had dark eyes and dark eyebrows. She didn't like the eyebrows. She thought they gave her face a raccoon quality. Guys didn't seem to think so. With her lithe frame and olive skin, Selena had been getting more attention these last couple of years than she'd known what to do with. But no one had ever made her feel queasy and uncomfortable the way Mitch Deever did. The way he leered at her. He made Selena feel dirty, like they had already done something together. Something filthy.

Which is why she hesitated when she saw the dog. She didn't want to go anywhere near Mitch's van.

"Poor dog," she said. Stump turned to look at her, panting, then turned back to paw the door some more. The dog turned back so quickly, Selena didn't see the red foam around Stump's mouth.

"Here," Selena said. As she stepped over to the door, Stump went nuts, nearly knocking her over. She tried the knob.

The door was locked.

"Sorry," she told the dog. "Can't help you." She tried to pat the dog's head, but the animal pulled away as if frightened.

Shrugging, Selena started on through the clearing, heading toward the center cabin. She was halfway across the field when she heard

rusty hinges rasping and, looking up, saw her mother opening their cabin's screen door.

Though it had only been a few hours since she'd seen her mom, Selena whistled and waved.

Like her daughter, Madame Xaviera—her real name was Helen—wore her dark hair pulled back tightly. But while Selena tied her hair with a sunny piece of orange yarn, Madame Xaviera used a black plastic butterfly clamp. She was a striking woman, but years of scowling had marred her beauty. She stared blankly across the field at Selena, as if she didn't recognize her own child.

And as Selena came closer, she saw that her mom's face was almost gray. She felt a sudden panic grip her, cold fingers closing around her throat. She started to run.

"Mom?! What is it?"

She hurried to her mother's side, reaching out to her, but Madame Xaviera pushed her away. She sat down heavily on the wooden porch's bottom step. She got up again almost immediately, walked unsteadily around to the side of porch and, dropping to her knees in the grass, began to vomit.

Selena held her mother while the poor woman retched.

After a minute, Madame Xaviera stood up again. She was looking even paler than before. She wiped her face with her olive-skinned hands.

Selena's heart was pounding. "Mom? You okay?"

"Mmmm . . ."

"What is it? Something you ate?"

Madame Xaviera took her hands down. Her eyes were yellowish, her face pasty. "I was just lying down for a second and—and I started getting these stabbing pains . . ."

"Jesus! Where?"

"All over . . . but one after another like there really was someone stabbing me, you know? And when I managed to stand up—" Madame Xaviera closed her eyes.

"When you stood up *what*?"

"There was blood, Selena. A lot of it."

"Oh God! Blood . . . you're bleeding?! Where?"

Her mother shook her head. "No, not my blood. It was all over the cabin." She sighed heavily. "People have died in that cabin. More than one."

Selena stared at her mother for a moment, then patted her shoulder. "Hold on." She clattered up the rotting wooden steps and charged into the dark cabin.

The smell of old wood and dank air hit her hard. The air was so thick in here it was almost like a presence. Her eyes flicked around quickly: the metal bunk beds . . . her black trunk . . . her sneakers. She started. The sneakers were sitting on the floor about a foot apart, toes splayed outward, as if someone—a ghost?—was standing inside them!

The illusion lasted only an instant. Then, once again, they were just a pair of ratty old Converse

sneakers. There was no blood. Anywhere.

She came back outside, grabbing the screen door before it could bang shut. Her mother was sitting on the bottom step, her back to her. Madame Xaviera was only in her forties. But right then, looking down at the woman's slight figure, Selena felt a horrible pang at the thought of ever losing her.

"Looks okay now," Selena said. "Listen, you know what I think we're looking at? It's the heat. It's making everyone sick. C'mon, I'm taking you to Molly."

Molly Meecham was, for obvious reasons, the Fat Lady in the carnival's sideshow display of freaks. But she was also a kind and talented nurse, and she ran an infirmary for the other carnies out of her van.

"No, no," Madame Xaviera said vaguely. "I'm really—"

"Yes," Selena interrupted firmly. She gripped her mother's arm and helped her to her feet.

In front of the cabin there was a hole, freshly dug. Looked like Stump had done some digging, Selena thought. She led her mom around the hole and across the clearing, making a beeline for Molly's red and tan truck. They were only partway across the clearing when Madame Xaviera pushed her daughter's hand away and stopped short. She turned, staring back at the cabin.

"What?" Selena asked. "You see something? *What*?"

But her mother didn't answer. Selena took her hand and, gently tugging, led the Gypsy away.

Mitch's walkie-talkie crackled. "Deever?"

Mitch wiped the sweat from his forehead with one hairy forearm. He pressed the talk button. "Yeah."

"Get over here by the carousel, wouldya? Over."

Mitch sighed. The last thing he needed right now was another problem. He pressed the talk button again. "What's up?"

"Stu and Karl had a fight."

He grinned. Unbelievable. It was the third fistfight today. "All right!" he said.

"Anybody die?"

"Very funny. Stu pushed Karl into the fence. Karl's got these horrible burn marks all over his back. Fantana's screaming bloody murder, says you set the voltage on the fence too high."

It wasn't the first complaint Mitch had gotten about the fence. He had checked the power setting on the fence two times already; it was set on low.

On the other hand, Mitch had brushed against the fence a couple of times himself, in the course of moving things around the cramped fairgrounds. And damn if he hadn't gotten a bigger shock today than he had yesterday. Much bigger. It was like that fence was drawing power straight up out of the ground.

It wasn't just the fence Mitch had to worry

about. Rides kept breaking. First the blocks slipped on the water slide, so the ride wasn't level. Then the Scrambler had a power surge and shorted out. As soon as Mitch fixed one thing, his walkie-talkie barked out an order for him to fix something else.

Right now he was standing outside the House of Death, the carnival's fun house. According to the operator, the guillotine in the Chamber of Horrors had jammed.

"I checked the fence," Mitch said into his walkie-talkie.

"Well check it again, dammit. Over!"

Mitch shook his head and raised the walkie-talkie over his head, cocking his arm to throw it with all his might. Then he saw the fun house ride operator watching him, grinning. He slowly lowered the walkie-talkie and snapped it back onto his wide leather belt. He climbed into the fun house's first car and waved. A moment later, the car jerked forward.

The quickest way for Mitch to get to the Chamber of Horrors was to go through the haunted house's maze of tunnels and catwalks. But Mitch was too tired for that. He needed a rest. He laid his head back against the car's leather cushion as the car rolled forward and pushed through the fun house entrance, a swinging set of wooden doors. Instantly the bright, hot afternoon sun was gone, and Mitch was plunged into musty darkness. Thank God it was a couple of degrees cooler in here.

The car swooped down so fast that Mitch's stomach heaved. That first dip always got a scream from the kiddies. Then the car climbed slowly up a long hill past grisly sights on either side—bloody hands holding candles in wall sconces, floating green eyes gleaming in the darkness, heads swinging on ropes.

The only trouble with all these effects was that you could see the paint on them. Nothing looked real enough to be scary.

"Welcome to the House of Death," intoned a deep voice over a nearby speaker. The voice laughed wildly. All so rinky-dink, thought Mitch. At a buck fifty—six ride tickets—the ride was way overpriced.

That's why, when Mitch had time off, he liked to hang out in the haunted house's first room—the Wax Museum. As the sound effects tape announced, some of the world's greatest monsters were displayed here: Frankenstein, Dracula, Wolfman. Mitch liked to hide among the wax figures, sitting deathly still and staring straight ahead as each car went by. Then he'd turn and scream right in the kids' faces.

Those kids got their money's worth, that was for sure. Mitch chuckled just thinking about it. Hell, they should have someone in here doing that all the time.

After the Wax Museum came the Vampire Bat Belfry, where furry strips hung down from the ceiling and slapped you softly in the face. A few small bats hung upside down in the crevices

of the walls, their wings mechanically opening and closing. Overhead, a huge black vampire bat wheeled jerkily through the darkness on a wire, its fangs painted red. But the artist had done a sloppy job—there was a big splotch of white plastic showing on the bat's head. Bogus. Totally bogus.

Mitch leaned back, letting his aching body relax as he rode through the Funeral Chapel. Here the arrival of the car depressed a lever, which in turn made the lid on a coffin creak open. Out rose a skeleton, his jaw opening and closing to match the soundtrack of ghastly laughter barking from the room's loudspeaker. Off to the side, a man in a dark suit played funeral music on an organ. As the kiddies rode by, he slowly turned his head. His face was a rotted skull—plastic, of course.

The car took another dive, swooping down toward a glass mirror. The car stopped short. Blobby red ghouls appeared in the mirror, bobbing up and down right behind Mitch. They looked more like marshmallows than monsters.

"Hi, guys," Mitch said casually.

The car rolled on. On to the Torture Chamber.

Mitch loved the Torture Chamber. Here were lifelike models of a man on the rack, a man being tortured with thumbscrews, a man suffering water torture, a man being pressed to death with rocks, and a few other delights. Old-fashioned weapons, from an ax to a cat-o'-nine-tails, decorated the walls. As always, Mitch

ogled the weapons eagerly.

Then the car swerved slowly on the metal track, carrying the mechanic into the final room. The Chamber of Horrors.

Here, a large papier-mâché statue of Jack the Ripper stood frozen in the act of slicing open a prostitute's throat. The Boston Strangler choked a victim till she was blue in the face. And best of all, Marie Antoinette lay on the guillotine, her painted eyes filled with terror as she stared up at the long blade about to drop down on her plaster neck. And just as you rode up to the guillotine—*thwack*!—the blade dropped.

At least, that's what was supposed to happen.

Mitch swung a leg out of the moving car and jumped out nimbly. He let the car ride by as he moved toward the guillotine. The blade was resting at an odd angle, jammed into the wooden groove on one side of the guillotine's long vertical track. He tried to force the blade straight.

As he worked, something—a sound? a movement?—made him look up.

He looked at the statues. They were all in their usual positions, staring straight ahead, lifeless. But it was the strangest thing. He'd gotten the feeling he was being watched.

Shrugging, he went back to work, and after a moment he worked the blade loose. He moved it up and down, letting it drop down several times into the slash in Marie Antoinette's neck. Then he positioned the blade up near the top again, set the latch, and waited for the next empty

car to rumble through. This time when the car hit the lever, the blade dropped down perfectly. *Whack*! Mitch grinned.

After the car passed, the blade started to rise once more, getting ready for the next customer. Mitch waited until the blade had worked smoothly for three cars. Then he climbed into a passing car and rode out of the room.

Mission accomplished. He closed his eyes.

The track led you out through another set of double doors, dropping its riders off behind the haunted house while the car circled around to the front again for the next customer. Mitch sat in the car until it started to move. Then he stood, swung a leg out, and stepped down to the ground, taking a few running steps before he was able to slow down.

"All fixed!" he yelled to the ride operator as he strolled around to the front. He didn't wait for a response, just headed on to his next job, the bumper cars. They were running faster than normal. So far Mitch hadn't been able to figure out why.

As he walked away, the operator for the haunted house shut off the power, bringing the ride's cars to a halt. The fun house's eerie soundtrack clicked off. The mechanical shutters on the fun house's front wall stopped banging.

And in the murky darkness of the Chamber of Horrors, a dusty and powdery hand took hold of the guillotine blade. The hand jerked the blade slowly but surely out of position.

6

Black Toenails

Wearing only her underwear, Maxi sat on her dorm bed, carefully pushing cotton wads between her toes. Someone knocked softly at the door. "It's open," she called. She was half hoping her visitor would turn out to be some guy, like the dorm head, Mr. Janklow, who would get all embarrassed to see her so scantily clad. She kept her head down, her eyes focused on her feet.

The door opened. "Hi," said a voice.

"Hey." Maxi didn't look up. She opened the tiny bottle of black nail polish and started painting her big toe.

"You busy?"

"KC," Maxi said. "Don't be so polite, okay? *My* dorm room is *your* dorm room. I mean, does it look like I'm busy?"

Maxi looked up at KC and flashed a grin, trying to take the edge off her nastiness. KC laughed nervously. One glance at her and Maxi could tell something was wrong. She wasn't in the mood to play shrink, either. The pretty blonde sat down next to her on

the bed. Maxi wriggled her toes. "What do you think?"

KC's eyes widened. "*Black*? Oh, Maxi, you crack me up."

Then KC fell silent. Head still bent over her feet, Maxi sighed. Here we go again, she thought. But she asked, "Okay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. What do you mean?"

"KC," Maxi said. "I've known you since I was two, remember? When something's bothering you, I feel it a mile away. Let me guess. You wish Graham would ask you out. And you're depressed because you don't think he ever will."

KC's mouth dropped open in shock. "*Graham* . . . ask me out?! Maxi, are you insane? He's our *teacher*. He's a grown-up."

"So? You still have major hots for him."

Graham Newton was their English teacher. A twenty-six-year-old Britisher, he was soft-spoken, tall, and handsome with dark hair that turned red by his sideburns. KC had been mooning over him since the first day of summer school.

"Is it that obvious?" she asked with a little smile.

"Are you kidding?" Maxi said. "You're just lucky he doesn't call on you more often."

"Why?"

"Because you're always so busy dreaming about going out with him that you never really hear a word he says."

KC giggled. Then she covered her mouth, as if she thought even giggling were rude. "It's that British accent," she said thoughtfully. "It makes me"—she blushed—"it makes me go all gooey inside."

"I'll bet."

"And the way his shoulders shake when he laughs really hard. I can't help it. I just think that's so cute."

"Uh-huh." Poor KC, thought Maxi. Still a virgin. Not like her. She'd had sex at sixteen and made damn sure her dad found out about it. Sure, the sex itself had been totally meaningless and depressing since she didn't care about the guy even slightly—but it sure had been worth it to see her dad hit the roof.

KC fell back on the bed, covering her mouth again, then sat up just as abruptly. "Oh God, Maxi, what am I going to do?" Her eyes narrowed suddenly as she studied her friend. "Uh, what about you? Have you got a crush on Gra—on Mr. Newton?"

Maxi smiled wanly. "Nope. You know me. I've never had a crush in my entire life."

This was true. She'd always had a slew of boyfriends (this summer was the longest she'd ever gone without), but Maxi was beginning to think there was something wrong with her. She had yet to meet a guy who could really make her heart flutter.

"Well," KC said. "I think all the other girls feel like I do. Wendy told me yesterday that she's got

a wicked crush on him. She said she'd give him everything she's got in the bank just to spend one night with him."

Maxi guffawed. "I don't think she has enough in the bank."

KC looked shocked, but she laughed. "You're so mean."

"Listen, KC, this is going to sound really off the wall, but did you ever think about *flirting* with the guy?"

"Oh, no, never! I mean, I couldn't."

"Name one reason why not."

KC didn't answer. Instead, she hung her head. "Anyway, he would never ask me out." Her voice was even softer than usual.

Maxi carefully capped the nail polish, then turned to face her friend. "KC, listen to me. You've got to change your attitude. Because it's driving me crazy. You're very pretty, and that's—"

There was a knock at the door. Wendy came in holding a large pile of books. She gasped and dropped the books right on the floor. Notebooks and papers scattered everywhere. "You're kidding me," she said.

Maxi followed her gaze. She was looking at the carnival poster. "Just decoration," she assured her with a laugh.

"It better be. Did I mention that I'm *not* going to that carnival?"

Maxi smiled. "I think you did."

"Good. Cause I'm not. Hi, KC."

"Hi."

Wendy grunted as she bent to gather her stuff. "I think I'm going to flunk bio all over again," she said. "What happens if you flunk summer school? Do you have to go to winter school or can you just go back to regular school?"

"You're such a liar," Maxi said in her low voice. "You're way too smart to flunk anything."

"Oh, right," Wendy said. "That's what you're always telling me. That's how I ended up in summer school in the first place."

Wendy Denberg, thought Maxi, another sad case.

Wendy collapsed onto the one piece of furniture Maxi had bothered to transport from her house, an old, black leather beanbag. A handful of white beans leaked out onto the floor.

"Why don't you just rip the thing to pieces?" Maxi suggested dryly.

"It was already ripped," Wendy insisted.

Maxi was about to contradict her, but before she could, a Marky Mark rap song started blasting in the distance. The sound got louder and louder, until the music seemed to be pouring straight through the room's wide open windows. Tires squealed. All three girls looked up in surprise.

"What the . . . ?" Wendy said.

KC hurried to the window. "Oh, wow. Maxi, it's Greg Dillon! He parked his car right on the grass." The music shut off abruptly. "Hi, Greg!" She waved, then ducked her head back inside

the room. "He's coming. Maxi, you better put on some clothes!"

With a lazy flick of her hair, Maxi got up off the bed. She pulled a crumpled white blouse out of a box of clothes on the floor and slipped it on. She took her time buttoning the shirt, and the front door started to open before she was half-finished.

Wendy hip-checked the door shut again. "Just a sec!" she cried.

Maxi chuckled. "Easy, Wendy, you'll break the poor boy's whatsit."

"Maxi?" a voice called from the hall. "It's Greg."

Maxi rolled her eyes. "Like we didn't notice his arrival." She pulled on a pair of baggy black gym shorts. "Okay. You can let him in."

Wendy opened the door. Greg was standing outside with a nervously hopeful look on his face. He was so tall and gangly. And he had close-cropped hair that looked all choppy, as if he had cut it himself, which he probably had. He was holding a large bouquet of long-stemmed red roses.

Wendy grinned at him as if she were the one he had come to see. But he looked past her, at Maxi.

"Maxi," Greg said, shivering slightly as if he had just come in from the cold, not from the sizzling July heat. "I brought you some flowers. They're long-stem. Like you."

"They're beautiful!" KC gushed.

"Isn't that romantic?" cooed Wendy.

Maxi smiled. "You're such a nut," she said in her husky voice. "Really."

She took the flowers and gave Greg a kiss on the cheek. His freckly skin flushed red. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and scuffed his beat-up sneakers against the floor, obviously tongue-tied with delight.

"I wanted to apologize for last night," he finally stammered.

"For last night?" Maxi asked. "What do you have to apologize for?"

"I don't know." Greg was talking straight down at his sneakers, and behind his back Wendy was giggling and making her *Aw-isn't-that-adorable!* face. "I just thought," Greg said intensely, "that I was, you know, pressuring you too much maybe."

"No way," Maxi assured him. "You're the S-word, one hundred percent."

"She means sweet," Wendy translated as she flopped back down on the bean bag.

"Now what should I . . ." Maxi glanced around for someplace to put the flowers; an empty can of tennis balls looked promising.

"Maxi," Greg said. "I had a vision. I'm serious. It came to me in a dream. By the end of today, you're going to be in love with me. Stop laughing, I'm serious."

But Maxi didn't stop laughing. Not until the light knock came at the half-open door.

Maxi turned.

Her mouth dropped open.

Standing in the doorway, hands in his pockets and a sheepish grin on his handsome face, was their English teacher Graham Newton.

"Hi, Maxi," he said.

"Hi."

"I hope I'm not coming at a bad time, I—"

Wendy was struggling up out of the bean bag. "Mr. Newton!"

"Oh, hi, Wendy, how are you? Nice to see you. And Mr. Dillon, hello there."

Greg nodded. His eyes were turning a dark, burning color.

Graham stepped into the room, hands still in his pockets, grinning awkwardly. "I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, Maxi. I tried calling but—"

"I took the phone off the hook," Maxi admitted.

"Ah." Graham glanced around. Everyone was standing frozen like statues. "So this is dorm living, eh?"

"Yeah," Maxi said. "You like the way I've decorated the place?"

Graham laughed hard, his shoulders going up and down. "Yes, yes, very much. Minimalist, eh?"

"Huh?" Maxi asked. Graham was always saying things she and the other students had never even heard of. He was probably some kind of genius or something.

KC was blushing deep red. "You came to see Maxi?" she asked, and then blushed even redder. Uh-oh, thought Maxi. Jealousy city. KC's smile

was stuck on her face like a mask.

"What?" Graham asked. "Oh, yes, I, ah. . . ." He gave Maxi a quick glance. "I have something I need to talk to you about, Maxi, but it can definitely wait for another—"

He was edging back toward the door when Greg, his dark eyes gleaming with suspicion, finally found his speaking voice. "So what are you doing here, exactly?"

It came out sounding pretty rude, adding to the tension in the room, which was already enormous. Maxi was shocked. Greg was usually such a polite and respectful guy.

"He just said. He had to talk to me about something," Maxi told Greg quickly. "What is it?" she asked Graham. "Something wrong with my term paper?"

"No, no, no," Graham said. "Well, yes! Actually, that *is* it, it's about your term paper. But there's nothing wrong, exactly, I just . . . ah, I just wanted to talk to you about it." He clapped his hands together. "Anyway . . ."

Everyone was staring at the teacher.

"Well, I'll be off, then. But say, Maxi, if you could come by my office sometime later this afternoon, that would be a great help."

He backed through the doorway. KC and Wendy gave him a farewell chorus of "Good-bye, Mr. Newton."

And then he was gone.

There was a stunned silence. Maxi looked down, surprised to see the bouquet of roses still

in her hand; she'd forgotten all about them. *It never stops*, she thought. This spring, because she was acting up so much, her dad had made her go to a psychiatrist. He gave up on that idea after Maxi told him that the shrink had asked her out. Now it looked like Graham would do the same.

"Can you believe that bastard?" Greg said, storming around the room like he was looking for someone to hit.

"Who?" KC asked, wide-eyed.

"Mr. Newton," Greg said. He sat on Maxi's desk for a moment, then jumped up again. "Of all the sleazeballs."

KC's lower lip started trembling. "He's not a sleazeball." She said it quietly but firmly. Maxi wouldn't have been surprised if KC started crying in a second or two. "And don't curse," KC said. "You know I can't stand it." KC was a regular churchgoer. "Dang it" was as close as she would ever come to real swearing.

"Fine," Greg snapped. "He's not a sleazeball, but teachers aren't supposed to hit on their students, you know."

"He wasn't hitting on me," Maxi said, glancing at KC. "You heard him, it's about my paper." She didn't believe that for a second, but if Greg would just shut up for a sec, maybe she could get KC to believe it.

"Bull," Greg said. He took a pencil from Maxi's desk and flipped it up so that it stuck in the ceiling's soft tiles.

"Well, that's enough excitement for me for one day," Wendy said. "I'm going to go home and do some studying." She looked much more glum than usual, which was pretty glum. Maxi suddenly remembered what KC had told her about Wendy's crush on their teacher.

"Come by here around seven," Maxi told her.

"Right," Wendy said miserably. "Then we party."

Hearing the word "party," Greg's head jerked up. He stared at Maxi, deep hurt shining in his big, puppy-dog eyes.

"I told you we had plans," Maxi pointed out.

Wendy looked at Maxi, then at Greg, and said, "Hey, why don't you—"

Maxi grabbed Wendy's arm and marched her toward the door. "Seven," she repeated, glaring at her. "Don't be late."

KC left next. She looked even more morose than Wendy had. Still holding the roses at her side, Maxi walked out into the hall with her and shut the door behind them.

"KC, he really did come by about that paper."

"Yeah, right."

"He *did*."

KC was drifting down the hall. Maxi followed her. "Where are you going?" she whispered fiercely. "C'mon! Don't leave me alone with"—she nodded her head back at the room—"him!"

But KC wasn't paying any attention. "See you tonight," she said, lifting a hand limply goodbye. She barely managed a smile.

When Maxi came back into the room, Greg was crouched down, reading the carnival poster. The guy just couldn't take a hint, now could he? He looked up, gave her a jagged smile.

"I'm here to give you one last chance. Come with me to the carnival tonight." His voice broke.

Maxi smiled but shook her head.

7

Haunted

The door to the infirmary van opened and Vince Fantana came out.

Vince Fantana, owner and manager of the Fantana Travelling Fun House and Carnival, was a short, balding man with silver muttonchops and tiny piglike eyes. He was wearing a white cowboy shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons and a black string tie. He was eating his fourth Hostess crumb cake of the afternoon. His paunch made a kind of shelf that caught the falling crumbs.

At the sound of the door opening, Selena Tokar, who'd been waiting on the van steps, jumped to her feet.

"She's going to be fine," Vince told her, wiping his hands on his stomach. "Nurse Molly says she's just a little tired from setup. Nothing she can't fix, believe me." He winked. Fantana winked so often some people thought he had a twitch.

"I want her to go to a hospital," Selena said firmly.

Vince took another bite of crumb cake and smiled at her with his mouth full. "No point.

Nurse says she's fine. And anyway your mom doesn't have health insurance, so—"

The owner's walkie-talkie blared. "The inspector's here, Mr. Fantana."

"I'm coming right away." He was about to go, but he turned back to Selena. "Trust me, okay?" He gave her a brief smile, crinkling his piggy eyes, then hurried off.

"Mr. Fantana?"

The owner stopped, turned.

"My mom was saying . . . you know, before she fainted . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I don't know how to say this, but—"

"Just say it, Selena, cause I'm in a real hurry."

"Okay. Well, it seems like mom thinks this whole place is haunted or something."

Selena blushed, aware of how silly that sounded.

Mr. Fantana grinned. "Your mother." He chuckled. "I can see the headlines now." Swiping the air with one stubby hand, he indicated a banner headline. "Psychic Becomes Psychic!" He laughed. "You know, if your mom would start giving people nicer predictions, she'd get more business." He winked at her, but Selena frowned.

"Look," Mr. Fantana said, "I'll tell you what. If she doesn't feel up to it, *you* can run the booth tonight. How's that?"

"That's great." Selena smiled, feeling somewhat relieved.

Fantana pointed a stubby forefinger at her and made a clicking sound with his tongue. "I'm counting on you."

Selena watched as the short old man hurried off through the campgrounds, waving greetings at all the carnies he passed. She continued to watch as he walked past Mitch's trailer, where Stump was still barking.

"Somebody tell Mitch to shut that damned dog!" Vince yelled.

But the dog kept barking, barking.

And inside the van, the white mask still lay where Mitch had tossed it the night before—on the metal counter next to the trailer's kitchen sink.

Though there was little light in the van, the mask was gleaming.

8

Let the Games Begin

That evening, at exactly six o'clock, the Vince Fantana Travelling Fun House and Carnival opened for business.

Vince had rented two huge spotlights, which he set up near the entrance to the fair. The thick, white beams revolved slowly, just barely visible in the dusky sky.

Vince said the lights would attract townspeople and countryfolk for miles.

Vince was wrong.

From the first hour the fair was open, it was clear to Mitch Deever that the turnout was going to be lousy.

Lousy was putting it mildly, he thought as he strolled through the half-deserted grounds.

After a life spent around carnival machines, Mitch could tell what was wrong with a ride just by listening. Tonight he was hearing nothing but problems. Gears grinding, cars scraping against their tracks. Well, that was one good thing about the sparse crowd. He could shut down the rides

whenever he needed to make repairs or do a lube job.

Then, a little after eight, he spotted a nasty crack in the metal base of the Scrambler. He needed his blowtorch for this one. He headed back to his van.

It was about a five minute walk from the fair to the clearing through thick woods all the way. Long before he got there, he could hear Stump barking. The huge dog was waiting for him right outside his van. When he saw Mitch, he started running back and forth from Mitch to the van, overcome with excitement. Mitch unlocked the van door and went in, the dog squeezing in beside him.

Stump bounded over to the counter and put his paws up, barking at the white mask. Mitch laughed. So that was it! The dog was after its "bone," the mask it had dug up last night.

But Mitch had no time to play games. He found his cardboard box of tools, pulled out the blow-torch, and was reaching for his metal mask and green eye shield when he had a funny idea.

He dropped the gray mask back into the box and crossed to the counter where the hockey mask lay. Stump was yapping like crazy now. He had to push the dog out of the way. He put down the blowtorch. Then he lifted the mask.

With its black eyeholes, the mask seemed to stare back at him like an evil face. Mitch flipped the mask over, wondering if the white Lucite was strong enough to protect him while he was

welding. What the heck. He'd try anything once. He positioned the white disk over his face and carefully fitted the plastic strap in back of his greasy head. Then he picked up the blowtorch and turned to go when—

Something made him stop cold.

It was faint at first, like that first instant of queasiness when you know you're going to throw up. But something—something deep inside him—felt different.

Barking loudly, Stump kept jumping up and planting his paws on Mitch's chest. He looked down at the dog, staring at him through the mask. Instantly, Stump skittered backward, pressing himself up against the bed, whimpering with fear.

That's strange, thought Mitch. Why would Stump be so scared?

Then he felt it. His skin was crawling.

He looked down at his long, muscle-bound arms. The tattoos were moving. Green inky snakes slithered all over his flesh.

Then he felt the first bite. The snakes bit hard and deep into his stomach, his arms, his legs . . .

He opened his mouth to scream, but a snake slid right in, the leathery skin gliding across his teeth. He started choking as the snake coiled down his throat and into his body. He could hear tiny jaws snapping. He was being eaten alive, inside and out.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, the creatures stopped biting. The tattoos became tat-

toos once more. Mitch was drenched with sweat, but other than that, he was—

Whomphhh!

Though he hadn't lit it, the blowtorch sprang to life in his hand.

The torch's blue spear of flame blazed in the darkness of the van.

Behind his mask, Mitch leered happily, his eyes reflecting the torch's blue light.

It was as if the light had gone on inside his brain as well.

Because now he knew what he had to do.

Hey . . . tonight was going to be more fun than he thought!

9

Merry-Go-Round

It was a good thing Vince Fantana ordered his workers to put up carnival posters far and wide. Because nobody from the town of Crystal Lake came to the carnival that night. Nobody. The few customers they got came from much farther away.

Like the Barfield family. The Barfields drove an hour from their vacation bungalow near Tanglewood, where they had come to hear the famous outdoor concerts of classical music. Instead, they went an hour out of their way because little Bobby wanted to ride what he called a "merry rown."

Mr. Barfield gritted his teeth. He had a few choice comments in mind for his wife the next time they were alone about the importance of disciplining their only child. But right now he just wanted to find the damn carousel and be done with it.

The Crystal Lake carnival was a big fenced-in rectangle, about the size of a football field. Near the entrance stood a little white gazebo

where customers could buy nonrefundable ride tickets at twenty-five cents apiece. To be safe, Mr. Barfield bought ten dollars worth.

The rides and booths were positioned in long rows, creating a maze of narrow, grassy lanes. Most of the lanes were dominated by game booths. The barkers yelled at the young couple from both sides.

"Step right up!"

"Check it out!"

"Win a prize for that cute little boy! C'mon, Mister! Don't be a tightwad!"

Mr. Barfield ignored all their pleas. Because the "cute little boy" had already made his intentions crystal clear. It was "merry-go-round" or bust.

Who knew how Bobby had gotten the idea in his head. But once it was in there, there seemed to be no way to distract the three-year-old from his goal.

But where was the carousel? The possibility that the carnival might not even have one filled Mr. Barfield with a deep dread.

"Why don't we ask someone where the merry-go-round is?" asked chunky Mrs. Barfield in a whiny voice.

"We'll find it," Mr. Barfield promised grimly.

His wife glared at him. "Why are you so afraid of asking directions? Could you answer me that?"

Mr. Barfield was carrying Bobby on his shoulders. Instead of answering, he tightened his grip

on his son's pudgy thighs as they dangled around his head.

"Merry rown," Mr. Barfield heard Bobby say above his head. Even after all those hours of crying, there was still a catch in the toddler's throat. Like he might start bawling again any second.

And then . . .

As they turned the corner, Mr. Barfield finally heard it. Mixed in with the organ-grinder music of the fair was a sweet, tinkly tune. His heart leaped at the sound. Sure enough, up ahead he saw the wooden horses, riding in a slow circle, gently bobbing up and down.

"Merry rown!" cried Bobby. He was clapping his hands and digging his toddler-size Reeboks into his daddy's throat.

"Oh, thank God!" exclaimed Mrs. Barfield.

"See? I told you I'd find one," Mr. Barfield said. He permitted himself one huge I-told-you-so grin. Then he lowered his son to the ground. Bobby ran forward so fast that Mrs. Barfield had to chase after him. While Mr. Barfield gave the carny operator his ride tickets, Mrs. Barfield positioned the boy on the wooden saddle of a large, white stallion. The horse's wooden body was slightly reared; its mouth was gaping open, as if chomping at the bit.

"James, c'mon!" Mrs. Barfield yelled at her husband.

"I'll stay out here," he said, "and take some shots."

The carny stepped into the control booth and started the ride. Slowly, the horses began to move faster. Mrs. Barfield and her son were the only ones on the ride. The heavyset blond woman was standing behind her heavyset young son, making sure that Bobby kept his little hands on the wooden handles that jutted out of the horse's head like Frankenstein bolts. Bobby looked so serious, thought Mr. Barfield. "Smile!" he yelled from behind his camera.

Mrs. Barfield smiled and waved. But not Bobby. Mr. Barfield cursed. You would think that after driving them crazy for four hours Bobby would at least have the decency to act happy!

As he snapped the pictures, Mr. Barfield kept adjusting the focus. But everytime he focused, the image blurred again.

"James!"

Mr. Barfield pulled his eye away from the camera.

Right away he saw why his wife had yelled. The merry-go-round was going too fast. Rising and falling, the wooden horses plunged forward wildly, their wooden jaws gaping.

His wife called again. She was holding onto Bobby with one hand now, holding the white horse with the other. "Tell him—" The ride whipped her around in a circle and out of view, scattering the rest of her message into the humid night air.

James looked around wildly for the carny. He saw the tall, thin man emerging from the control

booth, ever so nonchalant.

"Hey!" Mr. Barfield yelled.

The operator had already seen what was happening on the ride. He rushed back into the control booth. But the ride started going faster, not slower. Mr. Barfield could feel the wind from the whistling ride hitting his face. Mrs. Barfield was screaming now, her long, blond hair whipping behind her like a pennant. She was clinging to the horse and her son. Bobby was crying, crying worse than he had cried all afternoon.

Mr. Barfield dodged through the metal gates and rushed toward the ride. But the spinning disk was a blur of speed. There was no way he could climb on board.

He turned, looking for help. Sure enough, a crowd was gathering. But everyone was just standing there, gaping at the ride. The carny was in the booth, working frantically at the controls. And then it was as if a plug had been pulled . . .

The ride began to slow down, gently, gently coasting to a halt.

Before the ride had stopped completely, Mr. Barfield jumped onto the spinning wooden platform. He fell, banging his head against the wooden rump of a black horse. He was back on his feet quickly, though, dodging around the horses.

He hugged his wife, who was hugging Bobby. Mother and son were both crying. And so, to Mr. Barfield's surprise, was he.

A moment later, the carny was at their side. He was scratching his big, bald head, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Don't know why that happened," he said nervously.

Mr. Barfield didn't have time for the carny. Not yet. He was focused on Bobby. The boy was clutching one arm against his little chest. Both parents bent over him, gently trying to pull the arm free.

"Let me see, Bobby," Mr. Barfield coaxed. "Let Daddy see."

The boy appeared to be in shock. It didn't help that the crowd of gawkers had climbed onto the merry-go-round, and that the boy found himself in the center of a thick knot of people.

"Mean horsie bite Bobby," the boy said softly, keeping his eyes down.

There was laughter from the crowd.

"What's that? What'd he say?"

The remark was passed along as if in a rapid game of Telephone. There was more laughter.

Finally, Bobby stopped clutching his arm and let his parents see the wound. There was a cut all right, a mean-looking gash.

"Uh-oh," the carny said. "Looks like he scraped himself on the horse's teeth."

Bobby stared up at the man. He shook his head firmly. "Horsie bite me."

There was a commotion as someone pushed his way through the crowd. He was a short, balding man with tiny eyes and long, silvery hair that was swept straight back. He was dressed

kind of like a cowboy. By this time, Mr. Barfield had calmed down enough to get angry. He was about to start shouting at the carny, but the arrival of the man with the little eyes distracted him. "I'm Vince Fantana," said the man briskly, putting his hand on Mr. Barfield's shoulder. "I own this carnival. I want you folks to come with me."

And within twenty minutes, the three Barfields were on their way back to Tanglewood, with a million apologies from Vince and a huge stuffed bunny rabbit for Bobby, compliments of the Fantana Travelling Fun House and Carnival. As soon as they left, Vince hurried back to the carousel where he chewed the head off the carny operator.

"You trying to ruin me?" Vince shouted.

"Mr. Fantana, I swear, it wasn't my fault, it just took off, I don't know how, but—"

"All right," Vince said, turning away in disgust. "Get Deever, tell him to take a look at it right away."

"I've been calling him," the ride operator said. "He doesn't answer his walkie-talkie."

Mr. Fantana kept walking away. The ride operator could see how furious the old man was by the set of his shoulders.

"Just get him!" Fantana ordered, without turning back. "*Now*!"

Maxi had the air conditioning in her mom's BMW going full blast, but she was still sweating.

She slapped the steering wheel as hard as she could. "I should go back and apologize, right?"

"Def-i-nite-ly," KC agreed, nodding her head vehemently.

"Yeah, I know, I should. Right, Wendy?"

"Right."

It was almost nine. Maxi was driving about twenty miles an hour too fast down Birch Lane, a narrow country road. It wasn't so much that Maxi was in a hurry to get where they were going. It was that she needed to get away from where they had been. Why did everything always fall to pieces?

First, this morning, Jeff McGuinn's grandmother had had a stroke. Maxi couldn't have cared less about the old crone, but it meant that Jeff's parents canceled their vacation plans—and Jeff's party.

So Maxi, KC, and Wendy trooped over to Maxi's house to borrow her mom's car and go to the movies. But Mom was drunk. As usual. And Dad wasn't home. As usual. And when Maxi made a nasty crack about his absence, she and her mom ended up having a huge, raging fight. As usual.

Maxi had said things she knew she'd regret. In fact, she already regretted them. And when she drove off, her mom stood on the doorstep crying and saying, "Please be careful." Maxi couldn't get that image out of her mind.

"It just pisses me off so much," she said. "The way she just takes it from him, you know?"

"What's she supposed to do?" Wendy asked.

She was in the backseat but she was leaning forward, and she was talking right in Maxi's ear.

"Divorce him," Maxi said bluntly. She turned right so sharply that the wheels screeched. "She's supposed to divorce him." She was on a wider, faster road now; she stepped on the gas until she was once again exceeding the speed limit.

"Maxi," KC said, "that's your own father you're talking about."

"I know who I'm talking about, KC. Thank you very much. What'd you think? I was talking about *your* father?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to divorce him," Wendy said. "I mean, she does have some problems of her own, you know. And if you don't mind driving a little slower, Maxi, I'd like to live to be eighteen."

"The F-word," Maxi said. "Followed by the Y-word."

"If anyone translates that, I'm getting out of this car and walking home," KC threatened.

"She's such a coward," Maxi said through gritted teeth, ignoring KC entirely. "She is *such* a coward. I mean, everyone knows what's going on. *Everyone!* So what does she do? She gets plowed."

"She's an alcoholic," Wendy observed gleefully. "I mean, what do you expect her to do?"

"Yeah," Maxi said. "She's an alky. And how did she get that way? She got that way because Dad is a total *work*aholic. He's never home. Ever. How else is Mom supposed to spend her time?"

"Excuses, excuses," Wendy said happily. She always got happy when they talked about the troubles in Maxi's family. "I mean," she said, "did you ever think that part of the reason your dad works so much is to keep away from your mom?"

Maxi didn't answer. The thing was, she was terrified that Wendy might be right.

Truth or dare, she told herself. Did her mom share some of the blame for the mess at home?

Rather than answer that question, Maxi gave herself a dare—and took it.

"Maxi!"

KC screamed as Maxi swerved into the left lane.

Right into an oncoming truck.

10

Fate

The truck's air horn blared. The huge, silver front grill zoomed toward them like a monster's face.

Maxi turned the wheel hard, making it back into her lane at the last possible second.

KC was shaking. Wendy was screaming. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Sorry," Maxi said casually. "Lost my concentration there for a second." She couldn't hold it in; she started laughing.

She ended up having to apologize all the way to the movie theater, and having to talk KC and Wendy out of going home about three times apiece. It was worth it. The close brush with death had knocked her fight with her mom right out of her mind. And by the time she pulled into the parking lot of the little strip of stores known as the Carrolton Mall, her friends were speaking to her again.

Carrolton Mall was the largest mall for miles. It was tiny. It was also jammed.

"The movie's probably sold out," Maxi predicted gloomily. She parked the black BMW at an angle, across the white lines, blocking another space. She suddenly felt very alone.

She wasn't. The battered, blue Ford Taurus which had been tailing Maxi since she left her dorm, now nosed softly into the parking lot.

Maxi slammed her door, just for the hell of it. "Hey! Don't lock it," she snapped at KC as she went about trying to lock all the doors. "I told you, dumbhead. I *want* it to get stolen."

KC threw up her hands. "I can't do anything right."

"Don't worry about her," Wendy said. "She must be getting her period. You're getting your period, aren't you, Maxi?"

A few yards up ahead, Maxi called without turning back, "Go ahead. Just shout out my menstrual cycle all over the parking lot, why don't you?"

As they headed toward the theater, the blue Taurus parked quietly on the other side of the crowded lot. The driver sat watching the three girls as they approached the ticket window. He was shaking.

What in God's name am I doing? he asked himself. This is insane, following her around like this. I'm a grown man!

But it was as if he had lost control of his own body.

It was as if he were possessed. The man shouted at himself to stay in the car, to drive away. But

instead, he turned off the ignition.

Then he quietly opened the car door.

Just as Maxi walked up to the ticket booth.

The woman in the booth was on the phone and didn't look up, not even when Maxi tapped on the glass. Maxi could feel her fury rising. She tapped a second time. This time the woman did look up, but she scowled angrily. She held up her forefinger and arched her eyebrows, obviously miming the message, "Wait!"

"Look at her," Maxi growled. "Why doesn't she just do her job!"

"She's on the phone," KC said, pleading. Maxi glared at her. KC would wait on a line for hours rather than risk being rude to anyone.

Finally, the ticket seller hung up the phone. She leaned forward to speak through the tiny microphone. "The nine o'clock show is sold out."

Maxi slapped the glass in frustration.

"Do you mind?" the woman behind the glass said, glaring. "I'm a person, you know? I'm in here."

"Sorry." Maxi turned to her friends. "See what I mean? Nothing works out. Damn it!" She took a hard kick at a brown Snapple bottle that was lying on the pavement. She missed, almost falling over.

Wendy laughed. "The K-word," she said. "Klutz."

"Oh, very funny."

"The S-word," KC agreed, smiling.

"The S-word?" Maxi asked.

"Serves you right," KC said, her smile broadening.

"That doesn't even make sense," Maxi said. "You don't know how to play." But Wendy was laughing harder now, and so was KC, and abruptly Maxi found herself joining in. In fact, she started laughing so hard she had to hold her stomach.

"You guys," she said, when she had finally stopped giggling enough to speak. She put a long arm around KC's shoulders, then Wendy, pulling them close. "What would I do without you?"

"Kill yourself, probably," Wendy said.

"Thanks." But she grinned. She was having a memory flash, like déjà vu, all the way back to when she was nine and KC and Wendy were eight and they were seeing their first movie on their own at Carrolton Mall. They had laughed a lot that time too—laughed so hard (and not about the movie) that they had been thrown out. "Hey," she said. "You guys are great, you know that?"

Maybe she *was* getting her period, thought Maxi, because her feelings were all over the place. One second she was laughing hysterically. Now she suddenly felt like crying again.

KC was beaming at her. "You're the sweetest," she said.

KC was terrific at giving compliments, but they were often outrageous. Maxi? Sweet? That was a laugh, Maxi thought.

She leaned back against the white brick wall

of the movie theater. She rocked on her heels so that her back bumped against the bricks again and again. "So what are we going to do tonight?"

"Hey!" said KC. "We can go bowling!"

"I'm not going bowling," Wendy said. "I just want that on the record right now. Last time I thought I was going to die of shame."

"Wendy," KC started in, "the owner was just mad because he said you were denting the lane when you kept dropping the—"

"Here's what we do," Maxi interrupted. "We find someone to buy us some liquor or drugs and then we get totally wasted out on the athletic field."

"Maxi," KC said, "you better be joking."

"Why?"

"Why what?" asked a familiar voice.

All three girls looked up.

"Graham!" KC gushed. "I mean, Mr. Newton."

"No, you mean Graham. Graham is just fine." Their teacher was standing in front of them, arms crossed. He was wearing a torn old T-shirt, khaki shorts, sandals. It was strange to see him out of his usual teaching clothes. But, Maxi had to admit, he looked more handsome than ever.

"What are *you* doing here?" Wendy asked.

"Well, uh . . . I was going to see a movie, but I see by that little notice in the box-office window that I'm too late."

"Join the club," KC said in a singsong voice, and laughed nervously.

Maxi hadn't gone by Graham's office that

afternoon as he had asked. Frankly, she wasn't interested. But she was still glad to see him. She loved distractions. "So," she said, "how come you're all by yourself for the big Fourth of July weekend?"

Graham's eyes twinkled. "Ah, well," he said, "for us Englishmen, your country's Independence Day is really more of a day of mourning, you know. I like to be alone with my thoughts."

Everyone laughed, and Graham proudly grinned his toothy grin. He started with KC, but he ended up smiling at Maxi, and he kept his gaze there.

"This is quite a coincidence, eh?" he asked.

No one answered him. There was an awkward pause. Maxi was about to say something, but she stared at KC, willing her to talk instead. They'd had plenty of fights through the years where KC accused Maxi of stealing her guys. The fact was, KC always panicked around men and got deathly silent. What was Maxi supposed to do? Stay silent along with her?

This time, they were literally saved by the bell. It sounded like organ-grinder music. A mindless, happy tune that was playing slightly off-key and kept repeating itself over and over.

"Look," Maxi said.

Everyone looked. A large, white truck was pulling into the parking lot. Painted across one whole side of the truck was a colorful ad for the carnival in Crystal Lake. The driver of the truck was a clown. There was a second clown on

the passenger side, waving slowly and broadly. Despite their huge, brightly painted smiles, both clowns looked grim. The truck made a slow circle through the lot. "Hey, everybody!" one of the clowns yelled as they went by, "why don't you come to the carnival?"

"Maybe we will," Maxi called back.

"You better!" the clown said. He pointed his finger like a gun and fired an imaginary bullet. "Bang," he said. Maxi laughed.

"Don't even think about it," Wendy muttered as the truck drove away.

"I don't think we have any other choice," Maxi said. "It's beginning to look like fate."

"We have a choice," Wendy said. "Believe me."

"What's all this?" Graham asked.

"Wendy's afraid of the carnival because Crystal Lake is supposed to be haunted," Maxi explained, enjoying the embarrassed look on Wendy's round face.

Wendy shoved her. "Shut up! That's not true!" To their teacher, she added, "That's a total lie. Afraid of a carnival . . . that's so ridiculous, Maxi."

Maxi just laughed. Nothing like teasing a friend to pass the time.

"I'll get you," Wendy warned under her breath, but Maxi only laughed harder.

Graham was laughing, too. "A haunted carnival? But that only adds to the fun, now doesn't it?"

"That's what I think," Maxi agreed. She smiled

at him, her best sexy smile. Over the last couple of years she'd found that it only took a few of those smiles to get any guy to ask her out. They were like magic bullets. "Want to join us?" she asked.

"Ahhhh, I would love to, it's just . . ." Blushing, he glanced quickly at KC and Wendy. He couldn't seem to come up with an excuse.

"It's just what?" Maxi asked, giving him a sly look.

Graham wiped the sweat from his forehead. "God, this heat, it makes one feel brain-dead, you know? Anyway, I'm very tired, and I've got your papers to read. I'm sure they're all so very exciting. Ha-ha." He held up one hand in a sort of salute. "Anyway, I'll have to take a rain check. Good weekends, all!" The three girls gave him a chorus of farewells as he turned and headed off into the parking lot.

Maxi watched him go. Was she right about him or what? If he was interested in her, why didn't he agree to come along?

There was no way to know. She watched him get into his car. She was feeling mad again.

"C'mon," she told her friends. "Let's get out of here."

"Where are we going?" Wendy asked warily.

Maxi grinned and slapped her loudly on the back. "The C-word."

"The carnival?!" guessed KC, clapping her hands.

"The carnival," Maxi said.

11

A Free Ride

The Fantana carnival was bright, loud, and flashy. But less than a hundred yards from the fairgrounds loomed the dark woods of Crystal Lake. Here the noise from the fair was muted and distant. Here nature still ruled.

For a moment, the forest was deathly silent. Then suddenly the quiet was shattered. An owl screeched as it caught its prey, a tiny rodent, with its razor-sharp talons.

"What in God's name was that?" asked a low voice.

"That was an owl, stupid. Geez—haven't you ever hiked around the woods before?"

"Are you crazy? I told you, I'm from New Rochelle. We don't hike, we ride in car pools."

"Just c'mon . . ."

Crunching over leaves, the two boys emerged into a patch of moonlight. One of the boys was a stocky twelve-year-old with a round, immediately likeable face. His name was sewn into every piece of his expensive clothes, from his shirt to his

socks. Bernard LeBlatt. "How much further?" he whined.

"Just listen, stupid," the other boy said. He put his hand on Bernard's shoulder. "Can't you hear it?"

Bernard listened to the sounds of the carnival in the distance. "What if we get lost? Then what?"

Nick Harris laughed. "You're pathetic, you know that? How could we get lost?"

Nick was right. It was almost impossible to get lost. For one thing, there were those huge revolving spotlights way up in the sky, guiding their way. Also, they could occasionally see the top of the Ferris wheel spinning through the breaks in the trees. And as they trekked through the thick tangle of brush, the fair's organ-grinder muzak chimed louder and louder, drawing them forward like a magical lure. They were almost there.

"Okay. What if there's a fence?" Bernard asked.

"There won't be a fence. You think they're worried about a lot of kids sneaking through these woods?"

"No. Nobody but us would be that stupid."

"There won't be a fence."

"But what if there is?"

"Then we'll climb over it. Duhhhhhh."

Bernard cursed and hissed, "Wait a sec, would ya?"

Nick stopped and waited, hands on hips, frown-

ing with impatience. He watched as his stocky friend tried to remove the prickers from a vine that had stuck itself into his bare, flabby thigh. Head bent low, Bernard frowned with concentration as he performed this minor surgery. He cursed again.

"I told you to wear long pants," the other boy reminded him.

Though he had already turned thirteen, Nick was shorter and skinnier than his friend. Unlike Bernard's brand-name outfit, Nick's clothes had a ratty secondhand look. They didn't have his name sewn into them, either. But at least his worn-out old jeans protected him from the vicious, thorny vines that flourished in the woods of Crystal Lake.

"How did I lose my flashlight?!" Bernard moaned.

"Rich kids are dumb, you know that? What would you do with a big old flashlight, once we're inside the carnival?"

"What are we going to do inside the carnival without any money?"

Bernard and Nick were both from Camp Topeka in Cranville, about thirty miles away. That afternoon, one of Bernard's bunkmates had stolen his wallet. The camp director, Mr. Standiford, had personally vowed to catch the culprit. But in the meantime, Bernard was broke, just as broke as his skinny friend Nick, who was attending camp on a scholarship.

Nick was shaking his head in annoyance. "I

explained all this stuff to you a hundred times."

"Make it a hundred and one."

"Once we're inside the carnival, they'll figure we paid admission. Then you just say you spent all your ride tickets and, you know, they'll feel sorry for you. You'll see, we'll get on plenty of rides. I've done this kind of thing all my life."

"And we'll have lots of fun, right?"

"Right."

"Cause I'm beginning to think this was a real dumb idea."

Bernard had stopped to rest again, leaning up against the wide trunk of a big oak tree. With an annoyed sigh, Nick leaned back against the tree next to his friend. Which meant that both boys were staring back the way they had come.

"Dumb, dumb, dumb," Bernard said with a sigh. He counted off his complaints on his pudgy fingers. "First, we could get kicked out of camp if they do a bunk check and find out that it's our pillows that are stuffed into our sleeping bags instead of us. Second, we could have gotten killed hitchhiking over here. That guy—"

"He was just a little drunk," Nick said, waving the complaint away.

"And third—"

Bernard didn't finish his third complaint. Instead, he stared bug-eyed at his friend in the darkness.

"What's third?" Nick asked. But he had caught the other boy's fear. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Sorry," Bernard said at last, "I thought I heard something. Third is what those counselors said at the campfire last night. About Crystal Lake. All that stuff about that guy Jason."

Nick's jaw dropped. "You believed that crap?"

Bernard shrugged his round shoulders defensively. "No, of course not," he said. "But, you know . . ."

The truth was, Bernard thought the counselors had been very convincing. They said that Camp Topeka was the only camp within a hundred miles of Crystal Lake, because people were so scared of all the horrors that had happened here.

"Dumbhead," Nick said. "Counselors love to scare you."

Bernard shrugged again. How did he get himself into these things? He knew how. Nick was pretty much the only kid at Camp Topeka who was nice to him. He didn't want to risk losing Nick's friendship by refusing to come along.

The pine trees swayed and rustled, as if in a breeze, but Bernard didn't feel any cool drafts. All he felt was the humid air, pressing down on him like a hand. "You know what I *am* looking forward to?" he said, talking loudly again. "I can't wait to tell the guys what we did tonight and—"

He gulped. "I think I just heard footsteps." His eyes were locked on Nick's. His voice was barely audible.

Nick peered into the pitch-black woods. He

didn't see a thing. "You're such a wuss," he said. But he was whispering too.

"Listen!" Bernard insisted.

And this time, Nick had to admit, he *did* hear footsteps. They seemed to be coming right this way.

Then he heard something else. A faint hissing sound, like someone letting the air out of a tire.

Bernard grabbed Nick's arm, gripping it hard. "Let's run!"

"Wait!" Nick insisted. Because he still couldn't see anything coming through the woods.

Bernard grabbed him with both hands, shaking him. "Nick!"

But still Nick didn't move.

And then Bernard grabbed him again. Only this was Bernard's *third* hand. Nick looked up.

A tall man in a white mask was staring down at him, eyes leering through the mask's dark holes.

The man had come up behind them, from the other side of the tree. He had grabbed the skinny boy by the neck of his ratty white T-shirt. Now he pulled Nick several inches off the ground, scraping him upward along the tree's rough bark.

It all happened in an instant. For one second, Nick saw the snake tattoos slithering on the man's hairy forearm. For one second, he had a spasm of guilt. It was about Bernard's wallet, which was resting comfortably in his back pocket.

Then the man in the mask raised his other hand. This hand was holding a blowtorch. Nick tried to scream, but as he opened his mouth, the searing flame went past his lips, burning, burning, burning its way right through the back of his throat.

Bernard took a step back, hands hanging limply at his sides. His mouth hung open. He felt as if everything inside him—flesh, bones, organs, feelings—had instantly drained out onto the leafy ground beneath his feet. He felt as if he had become utterly weightless, as light as a feather. And feathers could not move. They could not run.

So he just watched stupidly while the large man with the tattoos worked away on his friend, the blowtorch hissing. The skinny boy's flesh was crackling and burning. Then the man let go. Nick crumpled, falling straight down with a thud as if he had dropped out of the tree above.

The man in the mask turned and looked at Bernard.

Suddenly, with a jolt, the stocky boy's limbs came back to life. He ran.

The man was right behind him, loping easily through the darkness, dodging around trees. Bernard was too scared to scream. Though he had just started to run, he was totally out of breath. Fear had knocked the wind right out of him.

Bernard's left arm smacked into a tree trunk that felt hard as rock. He was sure his arm

was broken. But he didn't have time to worry about it. Because just then, the crazy maniac's big hand clapped down on his back.

The man had him by the scruff of his checked shirt. There was a ripping sound as the man tore off the part of the shirt they always called the "fairy loop" at school. Bernard hated the way his classmates always ripped that loop. This time, though, he was immensely glad because it meant . . .

He was free. He raced forward so fast he almost fell. And then the man grabbed him a second time.

The hand caught his shoulder this time, but Bernard managed to shake himself loose. He kept running. Now he felt the man's fingertips touching his neck. But before the large, strong hand could close around his throat, the boy dodged to the left . . . and saw it.

The carnival! He had come out of the woods, and it was as if the fairground's bright lights were physically smacking him in the face, the sight was so shocking and sudden.

But between Bernard and the safety of the carnival, there was—despite all of his friend's promises—a fence.

The fence was high, with barbed wire on top. Bernard ran toward it.

The man was right behind him. Bernard could hear the hiss of the torch, feel its heat on his back. He could also feel the man's footsteps thundering behind his. Could feel him looming over him,

reaching down for him. . . .

Bernard reached out with his good hand—the one that didn't feel useless and broken—and gripped the metal fence with all his might, hoping to scramble up and over fast as lightning.

He probably never would have made it anyway; climbing fences had never been one of Bernard's talents. But the instant his stubby hand touched the fence, he heard something sizzling. He felt a pain so great it boomed in his ears like gunfire. His hair stood on end. Then there was smoke, curling up from his hand. But he couldn't move it. He was paralyzed. His whole body started shaking violently. First his hand, and then his entire body, began to blister and pucker.

A gigantic microwave couldn't have done the job any quicker.

In less than a minute, Bernard LeBlatt was done to a crisp.

12

The Monster

Maxi was peeling out of the Carrolton Mall parking lot, laying down some rubber, when—

"Maxi! Wait!"

KC grabbed Maxi's arm. Maxi hit the brakes.

"Isn't that Graham?"

Sure enough, there he was, sitting behind the wheel of his Ford Taurus. He was frowning, and Maxi heard the familiar whine and groan of a car motor that wouldn't start. "He's flooding it," Maxi said matter-of-factly. She felt strangely pleased. It served him right for trying to take off like that and ditch them.

She turned right and circled back around the parking lot until she came up alongside Graham's car. She honked. Graham looked up, surprised; he smiled weakly.

"Wait here, guys," Maxi said. She left the motor running.

She was aware of Graham's eyes on her as she strolled over to his car. She was used to men watching her. And though Graham didn't really

do anything for her, she enjoyed the attention.

She leaned in the window. "We've got to stop meeting like this."

"Maxi—" Graham hesitated.

"What?" But the look in the man's eyes, the tone of his voice, expressed his thoughts as clearly as if he had said them. So! Maxi thought. She'd been right about him all along.

"It won't start," he said sheepishly.

"Wellll," she drawled the word lazily. "Looks like you have to come with us after all, now doesn't it?"

Greg Dillon stared up, up, up—at the Monster.

The roller coaster hulked against the dark sky like some gigantic dinosaur skeleton.

Greg didn't consider himself a particularly brave guy. But as scary as the ride looked, he couldn't muster any fear. Glumly, he counted out his ride tickets, handed them to the carny at the gate, and started forward.

The man held out a greasy hand. "It's *eight* ride tickets."

"What? Oh, sorry."

Greg tore off two more tickets. Everyone at this fair was so nasty! he thought. There weren't exactly a whole lot of customers, so you'd think they'd be nicer to the ones they had.

He wound his way through the twisty path of metal railings. The path had been set up to hold a long line. But for this next ride, Greg was

going to be the Monster's only victim.

In a way, it should have been a dream come true, the fair being so deserted. For one thing, it meant Greg didn't have to wait for any of the rides. But instead, the empty fairgrounds made the whole carnival feel pointless. Why should he bother to go on these rides when there weren't a lot of other kids around, laughing and screaming their heads off?

Well . . . it wasn't just that there weren't a lot of kids around, he thought bitterly. It's that one particular kid wasn't around—Maxi.

The same carny who had taken Greg's tickets now hopped over the metal barricades and locked Greg into the first car, angrily snapping the safety bar in place.

"Is this really the world's largest roller coaster?" Greg asked. "I mean, it doesn't look all *that* big."

"What do you care?" the man demanded. He had rotten teeth, and his breath smelled fishy. "Don't worry, kid. I'll take you around so fast you'll wish you were on the kiddy carousel. Keep your hands on the bar at all times . . . or you're going to die, you got it?" The carny gave him a happy grin, as if the thought of Greg dying cheered him greatly. Then he hurried off to the control booth to start the ride.

The carny didn't check the safety bars on the other cars. Why should he? Those cars were all empty.

At least, that's what he thought. But in the

rearmost car a man had crouched down out of sight . . .

Back in the control booth, the carny threw the lever that started the ride. During operation, he was supposed to keep his eyes on the ride at all times. To hell with that. He pulled a whiskey bottle from his back pocket, took a long slug, then bent his head over the day's sports pages.

With a jolt, the long line of cars started their slow ascent up the coaster's first big hill. The chain of cars was like a caterpillar inching up a branch. Greg started singing "Maxi" softly to himself.

He could picture her beautiful face so clearly. And once again, the words that had become his mantra of the evening ran through his head. *If only she were here.*

If Maxi were here, everything would be exciting; just walking around the carnival with her would be ten times more thrilling than riding this coaster.

Of course, if Greg really wanted excitement, all he had to do was look behind him.

The man in the back car was sitting up now. He had a mask on his face. And an ax in his hand.

Click-clack-click-clack. The cars kept clicking against the track as they rose endlessly upward. It sounded as if someone were winding up the tension on the ride, click after clack.

Greg looked down. He really was pretty high up, a lot higher than it had seemed from the

ground. Maybe it was the world's largest travelling coaster after all, he thought idly. He watched as the car rose up out of the brightly lit fairgrounds, and he saw the dark woods spread out below him. The green tops of the trees looked like a soft carpet, waiting to catch him if he fell.

In the back car, Mitch was cursing. All those empty cars! Only one lousy kid for him to butcher. Where was the fun in that? He swung one long, limber leg over the backseat of the next car. Just as the Monster's long line of cars began its first screaming descent.

Greg screamed, just for the hell of it, trying to get into the spirit of the ride. Ignoring the carny's instructions, he raised his hands off the safety bar. It didn't help. He still felt totally safe. He still knew that this was just a ride.

Meanwhile, seven cars back, Mitch almost did some screaming himself. He had come damned close to being thrown off the coaster. And he had dropped the ax. But luckily the large metal weapon had landed in the wet, dank bottom of the car he was trying to climb into.

Unluckily, one of Mitch's long legs was still sticking out the side of the car, and it was thwacking against the side of the metal track as they hurtled downward. Sparks flew. It felt like his leg was getting electrocuted.

Cursing wildly, Mitch finally managed to pull his leg inside. He righted himself. His body felt like it was burning. His snake tattoos hissed angrily. He grinned through the pain. That was

quite a stunt, he congratulated himself.

Only six more cars to go.

But the Monster was going faster now. So fast that Greg put his hands back on the safety bar. Where was Maxi right this second? he wondered.

It wasn't a good question for him to ask: he knew the answer. She was out partying. Probably dancing up close with some studly hunk, or worse, off in a dark corner, making out. The idea twisted in his gut like a knife. Well, what did he expect? She had told Greg to forget about her. She couldn't have been much clearer than that. But the thing was, he didn't know if he could ever forget her. Not even for a single—

The cars lurched through a hairpin turn, and for the first time Greg found himself screaming for real. Wow, they were really cooking!

Five cars back, Mitch turned his masked head, trying to get a look down at the control booth. What was that idiot up to, running them around the track this fast? How was he going to kill that kid at this speed?

But instead of slowing down, the cars went even faster. And Greg was screaming his heart out now, because it was hard for him to believe this ride was still under control. The cars kept hurtling, dipping, diving, twisting. It was as if the car was trying with all its might to throw Greg to his death.

Then he remembered the words of the mean carny at the gate. *Don't worry, kid. I'll take you around so fast you'll wish you were on the kiddy*

carousel. So that was it. The bastard was trying to scare him.

Greg made a silent vow. As soon as he got back on the ground—if he ever did get back on the ground—he would head straight home. Enough was enough.

The thought offered only slight comfort. The cars were travelling so fast now that Greg's freckled face was shaking violently up and down, as if his flesh were about to come off. He gripped the iron safety bar with all his might, his knuckles turning bright white. He was screaming, screaming so loudly he couldn't hear Mitch screaming just three cars behind him.

Mitch started climbing into the second car just as the cars flew into the coaster's first loop-the-loop.

Greg felt sure he was going to drop right out of the coaster. As the car spun upside down, pens, coins, and other loose stuff from his pockets went flying out. His screams were mixed with gurgles; he was throwing up.

And still the cars kept going faster.

Greg started praying. Praying for the ride to end soon, praying that he would survive this nightmare.

He shut his eyes just as Mitch reached the car behind his.

Grinning broadly behind his mask, the mechanic slowly stood. The wind cut into his chest like a blade. It whistled blindingly through the eyeholes in his mask. Struggling desperately to

keep his balance, he raised the ax over Greg's head.

I'm a dead man, thought Greg miserably.

You're a dead man, thought Mitch happily. Then he swung his ax down with all his might, aiming right at Greg's skull.

13

Fortune-Telling

As he threw up for a second time, Greg wasn't feeling particularly lucky.

He was more lucky than he knew.

Because the cars had gone into their second loop-the-loop. So instead of Mitch's ax burying itself deep into the back of Greg's skull, it slashed down into the track.

There was a loud crack, followed by a horrible sizzling. The chain of cars spun through the loop really fast, raced partway up the next hill, then slid back and coasted to a halt.

Greg sat stunned.

Then he smelled smoke.

There were shouts from below. He looked down. He could barely make sense of what he was seeing. It was the carny worker who ran the coaster. He was waving. "Stay where you are!"

Where was he going to go? Greg waited, his heart pounding, his breathing ever so slowly returning to normal. Then he thought to wipe his mouth against the sleeve of his T-shirt, and he felt the wetness there. When he looked down

and saw the circle of white and yellow crud on his chest, he almost threw up for a third time.

The carny was clambering toward him, making his way up the track as easily as a monkey. When the carny reached him, Greg found no comfort in the man's large, scowling face.

"You okay?" The question was gruff, as if the ride's malfunction were somehow Greg's fault.

"I think so."

"C'mon," the carny said, unsnapping the safety bar and holding out a large, hairy hand. "I'll walk you down."

The lights on the Monster had shorted out, leaving only occasional crackling sparks. That meant the ride was dark. Thanks to the darkness, neither Greg nor the carny noticed Mitch as he climbed quickly down the other side of the ride. He jumped down into the grass and disappeared into the shadows.

As soon as he was back on solid ground, Greg felt another wave of nausea and dizziness wash over him. But the carny had a firm grip on his arm, holding him upright. The burly man handed him a dirty, yellow rag which he plucked off the floor of the control booth. "Here," he ordered, "wipe yourself up."

While Greg wiped the vomit from his shirt, the carny looked back in the booth. This time he came out with several strings of ride tickets. "Here you go, kid," the worker said. "Have yourself a blast. I gotta go see if I can figure out

what the hell is wrong with this ride."

The carny gave him a rough push toward the exit, and Greg wandered off in a semidaze.

As the ride spun out of control, Greg had comforted himself with the promise that once he was on the ground again, he'd head straight home. But now . . . He stared at the free ride tickets in his hand.

Maxi drove fast, and in less than half an hour they were whipping through the dark, deserted streets of Crystal Lake. Five minutes later, the paved roads became bumpy dirt roads that jolted them deep into the heart of the forest. Maxi knew the way with her eyes closed (almost), but the thing was, she couldn't have gotten lost if she tried. Almost every fifty yards there were signs for the carnival stapled to the trees.

"Doesn't seem like there's much traffic headed out here," observed Graham, who was sitting in the backseat with Wendy.

Even though Maxi wasn't really interested in Mr. Newton, it was still a heady feeling having the teacher ride with them, as if they had kidnapped him or something. She glanced at him in the rearview, and he smiled back. The look in his eye seemed to say she was the only one in the car.

"That's because most people aren't crazy enough to come out here," Maxi said. "Right, Wendy?"

"Right."

"Oh, yes," Graham said, grinning. "I forgot. The place is haunted."

"Worse than that," said Maxi with solemn pride. "They say Crystal Lake is the Devil's gateway."

"Oh my," Graham said.

"You better believe it," Maxi said. She wished she could scare the daylights out of him—or at least wipe that wolfish grin off his face. "They say that if you dig down deep enough anywhere around here, this invisible vapor starts seeping up out of the ground." She took one hand off the wheel and waggled her fingers to indicate fumes. "The vapor turns you meaner and nastier, the longer you breathe it in."

"Sort of like secondary smoke," joked Graham.

Maxi smiled. So did KC. Wendy guffawed. She'd been laughing way too hard at everything Graham said the whole trip, but this time she laughed so hard she snorted. She covered her face with her hands.

"And," Maxi said, "if you dig down even deeper? The worst creatures of Hell can get loose and come up for a little visit. Like Jason Voorhees. He's visited these parts plenty of times."

"Okay," KC pleaded. "That's enough, I'm getting the willies."

"Yeah," Wendy agreed. "I'm scared enough of carnivals already without—Maxi!"

Maxi jammed on the brakes.

Standing right in the middle of the dirt road, waving a big flashlight, was this tough-looking

greaser in an orange reflector safety vest. He was waving Maxi's car to the left, where a bunch of other cars had parked in a grassy clearing in the woods. As she parked, Maxi glanced over at KC. She was looking paralyzed again. Maxi caught her eye and indicated with a shake of her head that KC should say something to Graham. KC shook her head slightly to indicate that she couldn't, but Maxi widened her eyes in a silent command.

"So," KC said to Graham, sounding overly sweet and about six years old, "you've never told us how you ended up living here in Massachusetts."

"What are you talking about?" Wendy cried. "He told us that the second day of class."

Maxi shook her head. The girl was hopeless.

Maxi was the last one out of the car. As she slammed her door she spotted Wendy's camera lying on the back seat, a Leica Pendaflex in a tan leather case. Wendy had taken up photography about a month ago. She claimed it was because she was feeling artistic, but Maxi knew it was just another one of Wendy's hopeless ploys for meeting guys. It hadn't worked. Wendy was as boyfriendless as ever. Then again, Wendy never remembered to take any pictures. On an impulse, Maxi retrieved the camera, looped the strap around her long, thin neck, and followed her friends.

As they tramped across the field toward the carnival, they started hearing organ-grinder

music, screams, and shouts. Maxi was surprised. She thought she was too old for fairs. So why was she getting so excited?

They trudged up a dirt road lined on both sides with thick, dark masses of bushes and trees. The beautiful pine smell of the woods was mingling now with the cheap, cloying smells of cotton candy and caramel corn. Then they turned the corner—and there it was. The brightly lit carnival loomed ahead of them like the magic land of Oz.

KC gasped, then clapped her hands together and jumped up and down. "Oh, how beautiful!"

"Grow up," sneered Maxi.

They walked up to the entrance gate. They were stopped by a burly clown who demanded five dollars each.

"Oh, come on," Maxi said. "You're not going to charge us full price! How much time is left for tonight anyway?"

"The fair's open till midnight," the clown growled. "That's when the fireworks start."

"So we missed half already."

"That's not my fault. No discounts."

"Hey, it doesn't look like you've got crowds of people dying to get in here," Maxi said. "Let us in for half-price or you lose out on four customers."

"Maxi, *please*," KC pleaded, fishing through her wallet for a five. "Don't be rude."

"I'm not being rude, but it's almost ten o'clock already and—"

Graham said, "I'll pay." He handed over a twenty. Maxi shook her head. She could have gotten them in for ten, she was sure of it.

She went through the turnstile first. The clown harshly gripped her hand and stamped it with a tiny, black Ferris wheel. "That's so you can get back in if you go out," he explained sourly.

Then came Graham. Then KC. Then Wendy. As each person pushed through the turnstile, the metal arm turned full circle . . .

And clicked.

They were in.

Selena sat on the plush chair behind the star-covered curtain in the rear of the fortune-telling booth, fidgeting nervously. Mr. Fantana had promised to come by with news of how her mother was feeling. But so far, no Fantana. She checked her watch. Ten after ten.

She'd had so few customers. There was no way she was waiting around any longer, she decided, even though Fantana had threatened to fire her mother if Selena left her post.

The truth was, carnies were always leaving the fair, every chance they got. If a worker developed a love interest or any kind of job in a town they passed through, it was almost a sure bet that worker would ditch the fair. Fantana was always struggling to hold on to his crew. He would never fire her mother, Selena realized. She'd been stupid to worry about his threats.

She jumped up and started out the door of the booth. She almost collided with . . .

Mr. Fantana. He was grinning at her, but in the meanest possible way. "Leaving?"

"N-no," she stammered. "I just thought it, uh, might help, if I waited outside, you know, to attract customers."

"Uh-huh." He kept smiling at her, his pig eyes twinkling, as if to say, We both know you're lying. "Anyway," he said, "I only have a second, but I just came by to tell you that your mom's fine."

A large smile of relief burst across Selena's face. "She is?"

"Uh-huh. I stopped by the infirmary, and she was on her way over here. I had a hell of a time convincing her to stay there and rest."

That sounded like her mother all right. Selena's feeling of relief deepened.

"I told her you'd watch the booth till midnight, then you can go see her," Fantana said. He turned to leave.

He stopped short.

Vince Fantana was staring at one of the most beautiful girls he'd ever seen in his life, and he'd seen plenty. This one was tall with long, dark hair. She was making her way toward the fortune-telling booth. She had some friends straggling along behind her—a dumpy little redhead, a pretty blonde, and some older guy. But the girl . . . Vince had trouble taking his eyes off her. He turned back and flashed Selena an oily

grin. "Looks like you've got some business," he told her softly. "Don't blow it."

"This is such a waste of money," complained Wendy as they stopped outside the fortune-teller's booth. "Really, Maxi, you can't tell me you believe in this nonsense."

"I believe in this nonsense," Maxi told her levelly. She had her back to Graham, so she gave Wendy her rat face. When they were all ten, this face used to drive Wendy and KC wild. The two girls would scream and beg her not to make the rat face. This time Wendy only rolled her eyes.

Maxi turned and ducked into the booth. A cowboyish old man was just coming out. He had yellowish, swept-back hair and awful little eyes. He gave Maxi a big grin and said, "Evening." Then he slid by her, bringing their bodies close together. Gross!

The fortune-telling booth was small, with a couple of white plastic chairs set right on the grassy ground. All around the booth, on ledges and shelves, sat burning candles, silver zodiac signs, and other occult paraphernalia. In back, there was a curtain with two more chairs, both plush. There was a teenager sitting in one of these chairs, her dark face half obscured by the starry curtain.

Maxi stopped short when she saw how young the girl was. She'd been expecting someone a lot older. Getting a palm or tarot reading from some

kid did seem dumb, just like Wendy said. Maxi had a sudden impulse to push everyone back out of the booth.

But it was too late. The young girl was coming out from behind the curtain.

"Can I help you?"

Maxi shuddered. The girl was staring straight at her. Maxi couldn't take her eyes off her. It wasn't that she knew her. Somehow, deep in her bones, she felt as if this girl *was* her. As if she were looking into a full-length mirror. Which was odd, because there really was no physical resemblance between the two of them . . .

"Help us? Probably not," Wendy answered. She gave Maxi a pleading look. "C'mon, Maxi . . ."

Maxi still had her eyes on the girl. She said, "I wanted to know if I could get a group fortune-telling. You know, a tarot reading, but for all of us at once?"

The girl smiled. "A bargain hunter, eh?"

Maxi searched for sarcasm in the girl's face, but there was none.

"Hey, maybe she *is* psychic," Wendy said to Maxi. "You *are* always looking for bargains . . . or just stealing the stuff."

"Shut up."

"Girls, girls," Graham said, "a little decorum. After all, we are in a mystic presence."

"Aren't you kind of young to be telling fortunes?" Wendy asked.

The girl laughed. "Yeah, I guess I am. I'm kind of filling in for my mom tonight."

"Do you live with the carnival?" KC asked, wide-eyed.

She shook her head. "I only travel with the carnival in the summers. The rest of the time I'm in school just like you guys."

"We're in school *all* the time," Wendy said.

Maxi said, "Guys, she's supposed to answer questions about *us*, okay?"

Graham had already gotten his wallet out. The teacher was really eager to spend money on them, now wasn't he? Maxi didn't need a fortune-teller to tell her what *that* was about. Another horny old man.

Graham handed five bucks to Selena, who looked at Maxi for approval before she took it. Maxi nodded.

"Okay," the girl said. "Let's get started. First of all, my name's Selena, and you are . . . ?"

Everyone said their name. Then Selena held open the curtain. "Why don't you all step back here?"

There wasn't much room. Just two chairs with a small table in between. Next to one of the chairs was a back door, which was slightly ajar. Selena told Maxi to sit. Selena sat as well. Again, Maxi found herself staring. She couldn't help smiling.

Selena spread a silk scarf over the table with a gentle flourish. Then she handed Maxi a well-worn pack of tarot cards and told her to shuffle them. "Now hold the cards in both hands," she instructed, "and speak your question out loud."

Maxi held the cards as she tried to think of a question. Graham and her friends had positioned themselves right behind her, which was making it kind of hard for her to think. She wanted to ask if her mom would ever stop drinking and a few other questions, but she would need a private session for that and—

"Ask her when we can leave this lousy carnival," Wendy suggested.

"Wens," KC said, "you're going to offend her."

"No you won't," Selena said easily. "But if you don't let your friend concentrate, it could mess up the reading."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Wendy said, but she didn't say another word.

Maxi twisted her head and glanced up at Graham, who was smiling down at her. Right then, she had a psychic prediction of her own. If Graham got her alone tonight, he was going to blubber on about how much he loved her. She turned back to Selena. "Okay. I guess I just want to ask what the future holds for, you know, all of us."

"Your whole group?"

"Yeah."

"Whew," Graham said. "I was afraid you were going to ask what your grades will be."

KC and Wendy both laughed, but Maxi kept her eyes on Selena. Suddenly, she felt afraid. Which was weird, because the truth was she didn't really believe in psychics. But right then, she felt as if this girl might really be able to see her future.

The dark-skinned girl took the pack of cards from Maxi and started laying them out one at a time, gently turning each card as if she were turning the pages of a sacred book. The cards looked so old, and beautiful, too, with their odd, colorful figures. As she turned the cards, Selena recited the names of the cards out loud. "Three of Cups . . . Two of Wands . . . The Tower . . ."

She positioned the cards in three rows, with every other card horizontal. When she was laying out the center card of the center row, her hand jumped slightly. For the first time since she started putting out the cards, her eyes met Maxi's.

Maxi looked down at the card that Selena had just turned. It showed a figure in a dark cape riding a horse. The figure's face was only partly visible. It was a skull.

"It's the Death card," Selena said softly.

She went back to dealing, and when the cards were all laid out she smiled at Maxi. "Well," she said brightly—too brightly, Maxi thought. "I see very good things."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why do you sound so surprised, Maxi?" asked Graham with a chuckle behind her. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Of course she sees good things. We're good people."

"Besides it's great for business," Wendy joked.

"First of all," Selena continued, "you're all going to have long lives."

"More bad news," Wendy said.

Both KC and Wendy started giggling. Selena went on, seemingly undisturbed. "Mostly what I see is about you," she told Maxi, "because you were holding the cards. Understand?"

"Yeah," Maxi said.

"I see that you have a lot of doubt in your heart, that you're not a true believer. I also see a lot of pain in your past. Someone has done something to hurt you."

"That's amazing," KC gushed, suddenly serious. "That's so true. Maxi, she's reading your mind."

"KC," Wendy said. "How lame-brained can you get? Everything she's saying could apply to anyone in the whole—"

"I see that it's your father who has hurt you the most," Selena said, peering down at the cards.

There was a different kind of silence in the booth now. Selena was looking at Maxi intently; Maxi felt like the girl could see inside her, into her heart. That she could see the tremendous love she'd felt for her handsome, charming father when she was little. See the intense feeling of abandonment both she and her mom experienced as Mr. Wagner started to work longer and longer hours. He always said he was doing it all for them, but—

"You have to let the pain go," Selena intoned. "I've had pain like that myself." She paused, looking shy; Maxi nodded for her to go on. "My

father was a carny worker. He got my mom pregnant, then ran off and left her. I've never even met him. When I was growing up, my mother always used to tell me that we had to forgive him and forget him. Otherwise, she said, the bitterness would ruin our lives. I think I was able to do that, to let him go. But my mom couldn't, and . . . and it's like her own prediction has come true on herself. Do you understand?"

Maxi nodded slowly, mesmerized.

"Okay," Selena said with a soft smile. "That's it, I guess." She smiled broadly, breaking the spell. "I hope you feel like you got your money's worth."

"Wait," Maxi said as Selena started to rise. "What about—" She pointed at the center of the spread of cards, where the Death card lay.

Selena smiled again. "That could mean a lot of things. For one thing, the death card often stands for transformation. Something needs to die inside of you, for you to be reborn. That something, I believe, is your anger at your father. Understand?"

Maxi nodded.

But she had the uncomfortable feeling that the girl was lying.

14

Truth or Dare

"That is so amazing," KC said as they came out of the booth. "And you said it was made up." She cuffed Wendy's shoulder.

"It was totally made up," Wendy said.

"Oh, come on! How can you say that?"

They were strolling past the bumper cars, where kids were smacking into each other at alarming speeds.

"I mean, she knew all about Maxi's father!" KC said.

"What about Maxi's father?" Graham asked, smiling, as usual, right at Maxi.

"Nothing," Maxi said, her heart starting to pound. She eyed her friends. "Nothing I'm going to tell Graham about, anyway."

"Say, Maxi," Wendy taunted, "how about a little game of Truth or Dare?"

Maxi had never backed down from a dare in her life. She wasn't going to start now. "Go ahead," she said lightly.

"Cotton candeee!" sang a vendor, strolling toward them.

Maxi kept her eyes locked on Wendy. "I said, go ahead."

"Hold it," Graham said. He had his wallet out again. He was buying three cotton candies. As he handed around the pink blobs of spun sugar, Wendy said, "Okay, my question is—"

"Remember," Maxi interrupted. "It's going to be *my* turn next."

"So?"

"So watch what you say."

Wendy grinned mischievously. "My question is, why have you been so angry at your father lately? And the dare is . . . you have to strip buck naked and streak the carnival."

"You're really asking for it tonight, aren't you?"

Wendy shrugged. "Truth or dare, your choice."

Maxi handed her cotton candy back to Graham. "Hold this a sec." Crossing her hands, she reached down and started to pull her gray T-shirt right over her head.

Graham's jaw dropped. KC's eyes bulged. Wendy gasped.

Maxi got the shirt about halfway off when she remembered two things. One, she still had Wendy's camera around her neck, and it was getting tangled in her T-shirt. Two, she wasn't wearing a bra. But neither of these things was the reason she let the T-shirt drop back down.

The problem was, if Maxi stripped, Wendy would feel like she had won the game. Because Wendy knew that running around the carnival

naked was going to be less embarrassing for Maxi than answering that question.

So Maxi turned to face Graham. "Here's the truth," she told her teacher. "My dad is cheating on my mom."

Maxi was right. Wendy looked more shocked than when Maxi had started to strip. She forced herself to go on. The words burned like acid in her mouth.

"He's been having this affair with his business partner for over a year. Her name is Beverly. She's this really Waspy woman with long, red hair and one of those jaws that always looks like it's wired shut. Everyone in town has seen them together and has been talking about it. And . . . and it really kills me."

Graham was frowning. "Wow," he said. "That's pretty heavy. I'm sorry, Maxi."

"Don't worry about it." She tossed her hair, turned to Wendy, and in a singsong voice, said, "*My* turn."

Panic flickered in Wendy's eyes. It was a familiar and pleasing sight.

"Truth or dare," Maxi said. "Did you tell KC that—"

"Maxi," Wendy begged. "Let's stop. I don't—"

"Did you tell KC that you've got a wicked crush on Graham? You said you'd pay all the money you own just to sleep with him for one night. True?"

Tears formed instantly in Wendy's eyes, as if Maxi had slapped her, which in a way she had. Good, she thought as Wendy lowered her head.

"I'll make my dare real easy, not like you did," Maxi added, turning to look around at the carnival. "Let's see . . . . All you have to do is ride"—she pointed—"that roller coaster and not hold on to the safety bar." She smiled triumphantly. "Well? Which is it? Truth or dare?"

Wendy chose a third option. She turned and ran. Maxi laughed as the short redhead disappeared into the large dark fairgrounds. "Go ahead and run, coward!" she yelled after her.

"That was mean," KC said.

"A lot less mean than what she did to me."

Her hands behind her back, Maxi leaned against the counter of a locked game booth and smiled insolently back at KC and Graham.

Standing in the shadows just a few yards behind her, Mitch Deever smiled as well, though his leering grin was hidden behind his white mask. He was pressed into the narrow grassy strip between two booths. He was ready to strike.

"You know," Graham said, "I think I'm beginning to understand how this Truth or Dare business works."

"You like it?" Maxi asked.

"Not much, no."

Mitch carefully pulled out his switchblade. He clicked open the blade.

"We better go after her," KC said.

"Nah," Maxi said. "Let her stew. You know Wendy. She just needs to sulk for a few years and she'll snap right out of it. Besides, I've got her camera."

She pulled on the strap, trying to get the rough leather off her neck. It kept tightening like a noose.

Look at that sexy beauty, thought Mitch. Isn't she sweet? She's baring her neck for me to slash it.

"That's very empathetic of you," Graham said.

"Huh?"

"That means you're being very caring," he explained.

"You can go running after her if you like," she shot back. "After all, you're our *teacher*."

She put an extra spin on the last word, trying to jab him with it. He got the point. He reddened, looked away. "Well, maybe if we wait, she'll come right back . . ." he mumbled.

It was as if Mitch's body and his mind were working independently. His arm slowly raised the knife over his head. But his brain kept admiring the tall girl's stunning figure. He was drooling into his mask.

Maxi pushed off the wall of the booth. "There's no point waiting, she's not coming back so fast." She took her cotton candy back from Graham and took a big bite, the sugar dissolving instantly in her mouth. It was so sweet she wanted to retch. She looked around for a trash can to throw the stuff away.

She didn't find a trash can. Instead she spotted an intensely familiar figure on the other side of the fairgrounds—a tall man with dark hair. He was just disappearing into the Cyclatron. And

next to him, she saw a flash of coppery red hair, glinting in the fair's night lights.

Oh, God . . . it couldn't be! She felt faint.

Just then, Mitch overcame his confusion. With a low moan, he stepped out of the shadows.

15

The Figure in the Darkness

At the same moment, Maxi dropped the cotton candy on the ground. She started to run.

It was awkward running with a camera around her neck. But that was the least of Maxi's problems. The carnival had seemed deserted . . . until she tried to race through the fairgrounds. Suddenly there were plenty of people in her way. She almost collided with a soda vendor, then a tall man on stilts, then someone in a big blue Sonic the Hedgehog suit.

The carny worker at the Cyclatron was just locking the entrance gate as she came running up. "Let me in!" she cried breathlessly, trying to push her way forward.

The carny was strong, and one hand on her shoulder was more than enough to hold her back. He glared at her, then stuck out his other hand. "Five ride tickets."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly, then slapped her pockets. "Dammit! My friends have the tickets!" She turned, staring back the way she had come. She couldn't even see them yet.

Then, in the distance . . . She waved frantically.

"You'll have to wait," the carny told her, heading for the ride.

"Just let me on! They'll pay you the tickets as soon as—Hey!"

Without bothering to answer, the carny worker climbed inside the Cyclatron. He closed the hatch behind him, and she heard metal bolts sliding into place.

The Cyclatron was a large ride designed to look like a spaceship. As it started to spin, the whole thing lit up in garish greens and reds and yellows. It did everything but take off into the night sky.

Maxi started to pace. She was still out of breath, and now that she had stopped running, she could feel the waves of heat rising inside her. The waves crested and washed out her pores as sweat. I can't believe it! she kept shouting at herself. Of course, she had known about the affair for over a year. But running into them? It seemed like the ultimate betrayal.

From inside the Cyclatron, there were screams.

"They're in there," she told KC as her friend jogged up. Graham wasn't far behind. "My father—" she explained. "And that . . . that . . ." She couldn't find the right word to describe how she felt about Beverly.

"Are you sure?" KC asked.

"Yeah! I'm sure."

Maxi stared at the spinning ride like a cat eyeing a hole a mouse had disappeared into. If

she could have, at that moment, she would have torn her dad to pieces.

While she watched the ride . . .

A figure, hidden in darkness, watched Maxi.

"Maxi," Graham said. "Maybe we shouldn't hang out here. I mean, maybe this is the kind of thing you'd be better off talking to your father about in pri—"

She pulled her arm free. She kept staring at the ride. Waiting.

The figure in the shadows was waiting as well. Waiting until the small knot of passersby wandered past the Cyclatron and out of his way. Then the figure started forward, moving quickly.

"You know, Maxi, we were far away," KC said. "It might not have even been your dad."

"It was him," Maxi insisted. "And *her*."

Maxi, KC, and Graham kept staring at the spinning Cyclatron, as if hypnotized.

Which meant that no one saw the figure approach.

No one even knew he was there.

Until his hands closed around Maxi's throat.

16

Haunted House

"Greg!" Maxi gasped. Her face broke into a happy smile. It surprised her how glad she was to see him.

Greg was grinning back. His freckly skin looked paler than usual, and a little green. "Hey, you okay?" she asked. "Wow! You look like you've been through a food processor."

"I have," he said ruefully. "First I got whiplash on the bumper cars. Then the roller coaster shorted out and nearly killed me."

KC gave an exaggerated gasp, mostly, Maxi figured, as an excuse to put her arm around his shoulders. "That's horrible!" she exclaimed.

Greg gently removed her arm. He turned to Graham and stared, not even saying hello.

"So perhaps these carnival rides are a little too scary after all, eh?" Graham told him, eyes twinkling.

Greg didn't smile as Graham bantered on. The way he was glaring, Maxi thought he might charge the teacher and fight him right then and

there. She didn't care. All she could think about was her father.

"Hey, Maxi," KC said, "the ride stopped."

She whirled. KC was right, the ride had stopped. The lights were off, and the carny worker was coming out. He left the metal hatch open, but no one came out after him. He walked toward them. "Okay, okay, step right up and experience the world's fastest salad spinner. It'll dry your lettuce, fry your brains, and anyone who thinks they can ride it twice in a row rides the second time for free, courtesy of yours truly. Now step right up."

The big spiel seemed a little silly since the only customers were Maxi and her friends. The carny held out his hand. "Tickets, please."

"But—but where is everybody?" Maxi stammered.

The carny looked puzzled. "Oh, you mean the folks on the ride? We let our riders out the back."

The back! Maxi raced around the side of the Cyclatron. Metal gates led away from the back exit, leading the riders back to the fairgrounds. There was no one in sight. She groaned with frustration. She had lost them.

When she came back around to the front, Graham took her arm. "C'mon, Maxi," he said. He started leading her toward a game booth. "It's time to take your mind off your troubles. I'm going to win you a stuffed bear."

"Just a sec," Maxi said. She didn't like him touching her. She pulled free, turning to look back at her friends. Greg and KC were both

staring at her. The way they were looking, she knew she wasn't the only one who was feeling upset. "Go ahead, I'll catch up," she told her teacher.

Hands in her pockets, head down, she loped over to KC and Greg. "What's the matter?" she asked Greg in a low voice. "What are *you* so mad about?"

Greg didn't answer.

"Don't forget, he's faculty," she said. "He could flunk us."

"What's he doing here?"

"His car broke down," Maxi said. "We ran into him and gave him a lift." She kept looking around the nearby booths, hoping—and not hoping—to catch sight of her dad. Maybe it wasn't them. She forced her concentration back on Greg.

"He shouldn't be hanging out with you," he said. "It's not right. He could get fired for that, you know."

"First of all," Maxi said, glancing quickly at KC, "he's not hanging out with *me*, he's hanging out with me and KC and Wendy, *okay*? And second of all, chill! He's just along for the ride. No biggie."

Greg searched her face. She tried to look reassuring, as opposed to totally angry and frazzled, which was how she felt. It didn't seem to help. Finally, Greg turned and stalked toward the booth where Graham was standing. "I'm going to whip his butt at that game," he called back to Maxi. "You watch. *I'm* the one

who's going to win you a stuffed animal."

"Go for it," Maxi said, forcing a grin.

Then she looked at KC.

There was a haunted look in the girl's pale green eyes. She was close to tears.

"*Now* what's wrong?" Maxi asked sullenly.

"Didn't you hear what he said? He said he's going to win a doll for *you*."

"So? C'mon, let's go watch. He'll win one for you too." The stone of disappointment had rolled back into place in Maxi's gut. After seeing her dad with Bev, it felt more like a boulder.

KC didn't move. "I can't believe it. He bums twenty bucks from me so he can win a doll for *you*."

"KC—"

KC's hands were clenching and unclenching at her sides. "I don't care about Greg. It's Graham that really—"

"KC, don't start," Maxi said. "I mean, cut me some slack, okay? We've already got Wendy acting nuts. And my own father—" She had to pause to get the choked sound out of her voice. "My father's screwing around right in front of my eyes. I mean, I've got more than I can handle right—"

"You lied to me," KC said flatly.

"What?"

"You did, you lied! Like you always do!"

Maxi glanced back at the game booth where Graham and Greg stood side by side, throwing darts at a row of tiny balloons. They stopped

throwing. They had lost. They both slapped down more money.

"KC," she said, trying—and failing—to keep her impatience out of her voice, "you're making a whole big thing out of nothing. What difference does it make what he said? It was just—"

" 'Why don't you flirt with him?' you said. But you knew all along, didn't you? You knew! You knew he liked you. Just like"—her voice caught—"just like they all do. And you enjoy it. You enjoy stealing them away . . . anyone I'm interested in."

"KC, you know that's not true." Though actually, thought Maxi, it *was* true. "Look, I mean, I can't help it if—"

It was an old argument, and Maxi knew from long experience that the line she was about to use was a bad one. She stopped herself, but not in time.

KC glared at her. "You can't help it if they all like you better than they like me? That's what you were going to say, wasn't it? *Wasn't it?!* Well, I *can* help it. Okay? All I have to do is never hang out with you again!"

"KC—"

Maxi grabbed KC's hand, but she angrily yanked it free and stormed off into the fairgrounds. Maxi sighed. Two down!

Graham shouted. She turned. Her teacher was holding up a tiny doll—it looked like a skunk—and was waving happily at her, signalling for her to come over. Greg looked furious. He wasn't

holding up any doll. Maxi motioned that she would be there in a second; then she turned and jogged after KC.

But KC saw her coming and ran faster. She had her head down now, in a way that told Maxi she was crying. Maxi slowed to a halt. To hell with her. Let her cry.

It was turning into some awful night!

The operator at the House of Death sullenly watched the pretty, blond teenager hurrying toward him. He was in the middle of a pleasant daydream and in no mood for interruptions. He didn't get up until the girl was standing right in front of him.

She appeared to be in a big hurry, too, as if all of a sudden she just *had* to go through the fun house. Grunting, he stood. The teenager had her head down. She was crying. Little silent sobs. She kept biting her lip, too, trying to keep the sound in, and her nose was red. Well, the carny had troubles of his own; he had no sympathy for bawling teenyboppers.

Without looking up, and without even bothering to count, the girl handed him a long strip of ride tickets. The tickets were hot and moist. "What'd you do? Blow your nose with these things?" he asked. He laughed. She didn't.

He ripped off six tickets and tried to hand the rest back to her, but she was already hurrying past him and taking her place in the front car.

He shrugged. He latched her safety bar, pulling

on the bar once to double-check that the girl was locked in, and that she'd stay locked in throughout the ride. Then he walked back to the booth. He threw the lever. The girl's car started forward.

She had paid to go through the House of Death, so through the House of Death she would go. The blond girl still had her head down as her car pushed slowly through the first set of wooden doors. Then she was gone.

Right away the carny sat down again. He went back to daydreaming about how someday soon (like tomorrow) he would quit the Fantana Travelling Fun House and Carnival and make a fortune by . . . Damn. He couldn't remember how he was going to make his fortune.

The boy's shouting ruined his daydream altogether.

He gazed off in the direction of the Tilt-A-Whirl. The cars looked like they were spinning and tilting faster than usual. Only one boy was riding, but he was shouting his head off. The carny chuckled. Stu must be taking out his frustrations on the young rider.

Well, he had plenty of frustrations of his own to worry about. *Bang, bang, bang*—the black shutters of the haunted house kept rhythmically knocking right above the carny's head. No wonder he always had such a ripping headache.

There was no sound from within the haunted house, though. Not a peep out of that blonde. No surprise, the carny thought. It was a lousy ride.

Then he heard the screams.

They were piercing screams, each cry a high-pitched shout that seemed to stab the air. The carny's eyebrows rose in surprise. He stroked his moustache. Those screams had sounded awfully genuine. Usually the kiddies who were unfortunate enough to waste their ride tickets on the haunted house screamed just for the fun of it, and their screams sounded forced. But this . . .

The girl inside the fun house stopped screaming as abruptly as she had started. Then she started again, crying out even more desperately this time. The carny thought he heard her yelling, "Oh God, no!"

He grinned as he realized what was going on. Mitch! The mechanic must have snuck into the Chamber of Horrors again. That was the only thing that would make the girl scream like that.

Good for Mitch! Fantana had threatened to fire him the last time he pulled that stunt. But Mitch was tough. He did whatever—

There was a sudden wrenching sound from the Tilt-A-Whirl, and . . . Good God! It looked like a whole car had dislodged from the tracks. The boy's body was flying through the hot, night air.

The boy did a perfect swan dive.

Except he landed on his head on rock-hard ground.

For a second, there was utter silence, and the carny wondered if he had really seen what he thought he'd seen.

Then there were shouts as several carnies started running toward the accident. The fun

house operator started running as well. He arrived just as Vince Fantana drove up in his small, brown minivan, which he used to get around the fair quickly. Someone had already thrown a blanket over the boy. The carny tried not to look.

"Get him in the van," Fantana was ordering in a low voice. "You, Mike, get him to the hospital. Stu—get some guys to help you get that broken Tilt-A-Whirl car out of sight. Just put up a closed-for-repairs sign and get back to work. Not a word about this to anyone! Understood?"

And a few minutes after that, the boy and the van were gone—vanished—as if they'd never existed.

Meanwhile, back at the unattended fun house, KC's car had pushed out through the double doors in back.

The young girl lay slumped over her seat.

Only her head was missing.

17

Shoot the Clown

Maxi was leaning with her back against the counter of the game booth. From where she stood, she couldn't see what had happened at the Tilt-A-Whirl. She had heard the distant shouts and screams. But hey, shouts and screams were natural at a carnival.

Then she saw the people running by the booth, all headed in the same direction. That worried her a little. Then a mother hustled past, going the other way, obviously leaving the fair. She was holding her young son firmly by the collar. The dark-haired boy was complaining. He didn't want to go home.

"This fair is really dangerous," the mother called to Maxi, when she saw her looking. "Better get out while you can!"

Dangerous? thought Maxi idly. Hmmmm . . . maybe this carnival was more fun than she thought. Instead of getting out, she turned lazily to watch Graham and Greg. "C'mon, c'mon, C'MON!" Greg was urging himself, slapping the

wooden counter of the game booth with disgust. Graham was chuckling. Which told Maxi everything she needed to know about who was winning.

They were playing the game where you shot a water pistol into the grinning mouth of a plastic clown. As long as you kept hitting the target, a balloon over the clown's head kept inflating. If the balloon burst, you won a prize. But as both Graham and Greg had quickly discovered, you had to win a whole lot of times before you had a chance at winning one of the big stuffed animals.

She fingered the leather camera strap of Wendy's camera, which kept digging into her neck. Where was Wendy, anyway? "Guys," she said. "I don't want a stuffed animal. Really. I mean it."

Ignoring Maxi, Graham said, "Again," to the carny who was operating the booth. He slapped down more money. He was paying for both him and Greg now. It was like a duel to the death. Bored, Maxi idly pulled the trigger of the gun in front of her.

"Want to play?" the carny asked her for the hundredth time. He had a small head and a pimply face. "You can play for free," he offered.

She knew that trick. She wasn't in the mood to be suckered. After all, she was already being suckered by her own dad. She shook her head.

Then she saw him.

Directly across from her, there was a man

standing behind the booth, his eyes staring out the holes in the clown mask.

Staring right at her.

At that moment—*BANG!*—the shot rang out.

18

I Dare You

Maxi jumped back, sure she'd been shot.

Then she realized Graham had just popped his clown's balloon.

She looked back at the clown's face that grinned on the wall across from her. The dark eyes were blank. The man was gone.

Or maybe she had only imagined him. What was wrong with her? She never thought she'd see the day when she acted like the big C-word.

"Maxi! Look!" Graham was beaming at her. He was holding a giant black-eared Snoopy. Greg was standing beside him, empty-handed and glowering.

"How much did that cost you?" Maxi drawled.

"Cost me?" Graham grinned ecstatically. "Are you kidding? I won it. It was free!"

"Right," Maxi said.

"He had a better gun," Greg grumbled.

Maxi tossed her hair over her shoulder. "You're both being ridiculous." She took the Snoopy by the head, holding it in a careless stranglehold. "Two guys duking it out with water pistols, that's really

great. C'mon, I want to find Wendy and KC and get out of here."

"What?" Graham looked stunned. "But we haven't been on any rides yet. And at midnight there's the fireworks."

"You stay," Maxi suggested.

"Maxi, wait," Greg said.

He grabbed her hand. He was staring at her. There was something about the intensity in his face that made her squirm.

"What?" she asked.

"You have to go on one ride."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah? Who says?"

"No, no," Graham said. "The boy's right. One ride. That's only fair—uh, no pun intended. Haha."

Greg ignored him, keeping his dark eyes on Maxi. He was looking mischievous all of a sudden. "Listen, I happen to know there's one ride that even *you* don't have the guts to go on."

"Really? You mean Maxi gets scared sometimes?" Graham asked. "I find that hard to imagine."

Maxi looked down, watching her black boot scuff the dirt. She knew what Greg was trying to pull, but it was working all the same. "Don't be an ass, I'm not scared, I'm bored, so let's—"

"No, Maxi," Greg said. "You're scared. I'm telling you. There's this one ride that's got you totally freaked."

"Okay, wiseass. Name it."

He gave the answer proudly. "The Tunnel of Love."

Maxi's head rocked back as she laughed. She again turned to go, only this time Greg said, "I dare you."

Those were fighting words. "You jerk," she said. "You're really pushing it, you know that?"

"I told you you were scared."

"*Scared?*"

"That's right."

"That's such a laugh."

"Prove it."

"Uh, kids," Graham began. "You know how mature you sound?"

That was all Maxi needed. Because that was her father's response to everything. When she was more mature, her father said, she would understand why he had to work such long hours. When she was more mature, she would understand why mommy and daddy weren't getting along so well anymore. When she was more mature . . . She pushed the giant Snoopy doll back into Graham's arms. "Okay," she told Greg. "Let's go."

As she wandered miserably through the carnival, Wendy kept shoving handfuls of caramel corn into her small mouth. Her jaw ached from chewing the sticky candy. She couldn't even taste it anymore, and she certainly wasn't hungry. But still she kept forcing in more and more junk food.

Her round, apple cheeks were stained with tears. Her mascara was all over the place. She knew she must look awful. That was one of the many curses of being homely, she thought miserably. When a girl like Maxi cried, she just looked prettier; the guys all lined up to comfort her. When Wendy cried, she usually ended up looking like death warmed over.

She had reached one of the far corners of the carnival. She found herself facing a large, black tent. Over the entrance hung a crescent-shaped sign: SIDE SHOW. Next to the entrance, a midget was sitting on a high stool. He eyed her coldly as she approached. He held out his hand. "Eight ride tickets."

"W-what's inside?" Wendy asked.

"Freaks," the midget said matter-of-factly. "Freaks of nature. Greatest freaks in the whole world. You'll see things that'll make your eyes pop out. Hey, the last kid who went in, he screamed for about ten minutes. I guarantee you'll hurl or your money back."

"Sounds like fun," Wendy said.

Freaks, she thought, tears welling. Freaks like herself. She pulled out the ride tickets.

The midget held the tent flap open. Inside she saw only darkness. She looked at him questioningly. He nodded. "Get in," he said.

Inside, the dark tent was lined with stalls. Each stall was hidden behind another flap and labelled with another sign. As usual, she wasn't wearing her glasses. She peered at the names.

The Fat Lady. The Man with Two Heads. The Snake Lady. The Fire-eater. The Midget. She chose the Fat Lady.

There was no sound from inside the stall as she approached. The thought of the Fat Lady sitting inside, just sitting and waiting for her to come and look at her, made Wendy's stomach lurch. She stepped closer. "Hello?" she called. "Uh, excuse me . . . what do I do? Do I just come in?"

No response.

Wendy put her hand on the black canvas edge of the stall's curtain. She pulled the flap back and ducked her head inside.

The first thing that struck her was the smell. Mixed with the sawdust smell were the powerful odors of sweat and blood. It made her want to gag. But she couldn't let herself do that. How would the Fat Lady feel if she took one look at her and puked?

It was dark inside the stall. It took a second for Wendy's eyes to adjust. And then she saw that it wasn't the Fat Lady's stall after all. They must have mixed up the signs. Because sitting here, his back to her, was a large, muscle-bound man whose back was covered with the most amazing tattoos.

Whoever it was, he had an amazing bod. He was built like a superhero in a comic book. He didn't appear to have a stitch of clothes on, so he was showing off *all* his tattoos. That midget

was right. Wendy's eyes were bugging right out of her head.

Maxi had always had her pick of boyfriends. But all her life Wendy had longed for just one guy who would care about her, pay attention to *her*. Her eyes were locked on the man's naked body. Despite the gagging odor, she felt faint with desire.

Then the Tattooed Man turned his head and stared at her.

He was wearing a mask.

And holding a hacksaw.

19

The Show's Dead Tonight

Selena stepped out of the fortune-telling booth, closing the door partway behind her. She hadn't had a single customer since those teenage girls. She couldn't wait any longer.

Turning to her right, she hurried through the empty fairgrounds. Many of the carnies, she now saw, had already left their posts. At the water slide, a young, blond boy was whizzing down the ramp all by himself, with no operator in sight. If Selena hadn't been in such a rush, she would have stopped and yelled at the boy to come down. It wasn't safe for him to ride alone. But Selena was in too much of a hurry. Besides, she was too far away to see that the whole ride was trembling.

Her jaw clenched as she ran. Was it her imagination? Or were the two women who sold the glow-in-the-dark necklaces giving her funny looks, whispering, even laughing, as she went by. She looked the other way, ignoring them, which meant she spotted Big Joe, who ran the Skeeball concession. He was smirking.

She'd been nervous all night, but now her heart started to pound. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. She broke into a trot.

About twenty yards up ahead, Peg O'Neill had a microphone in her hand and was trying—unsuccessfully—to attract customers for the old can-she-guess-your-age-or-weight? game. Back in the clearing, Peg's van was parked right next to Molly's, where her mom was resting. Peg might know something. Selena hurried toward her.

Peg got a funny look on her face when she saw her coming. The tall, broad-shouldered woman boomed into the mike, "Don't tell me you want me to guess your age, Selena? Uh, let's see? Are you . . . six years old? No? Give that girl a Kewpie doll!" She chuckled into the mike, her laughter reverberating. Then she lowered the mike and said, "You're still here? Haven't you heard? The show's dead tonight. Most of the guys have been knocking off early and going back to their vans to get a little shut-eye. We could all use it, too, after the way Fantana—"

"Where is she?" Selena demanded.

When Peg didn't answer right away, Selena grabbed one of the woman's muscular arms. "I said, where is she?"

"Who?"

"You know who. My mom!"

"Now, Selena, how would I know where—"

"You know, I can tell. Just tell me!"

Peg sighed. She glanced around furtively, her face dark. She lowered her voice. "Mr. Fantana

thought it would be better if we told you after we closed tonight because—"

"Told me what?"

"Look, you know Fantana, he was probably afraid you'd runoff or that he'd have to send one of the workers to drive you to—" She stopped short, biting her lip.

Selena felt like she was going to burst. "Drive me where?!"

"Selena, don't get scared, okay? But Helen seemed really worn out so . . . so we took her to the local hospital, just to check out what—"

"The *hospital?!*"

"Yeah. See, the doctors say she's—" Peg grimaced. "Look, kid, the doctors say she's in some kind of a coma, okay? But I'm sure she'll be—Hey, Selena, hold on! Selena! Where are you going?"

Selena raced for the exit, running flat out toward the two large, revolving spotlights. She was so frenzied she could barely think. As a result, she almost ran straight into the fence.

Moe, the clown who ran the entrance gate, was gone. The big metal gate was shut. In his place, a metal sign hung on the fence. BACK IN TEN MINUTES.

Selena let out a stream of curse words so forceful one might almost have expected the gates to open in response. They didn't.

She knew this trick! Sometimes when too many customers were leaving and no customers were arriving, Vince pulled Moe from the gate as a

way of getting people to spend just a few more quarters before he let them go.

She was about to scale the fence when a voice behind her barked, "What's going on?"

She turned. A heavyset, lonely looking man with a balloon in his hand stood behind her, eyeing the closed gate.

"We're . . . locked in," she said, panting for breath. "If you want to get out, don't bother waiting. I'm climbing over."

The man grinned. "Locked in, eh? Well, they can't keep me in that easy. This carnival stinks. The games are rigged. I almost fell off the Ferris wheel and broke my neck. Here, out of my way . . ."

Wanting to show off, the man pushed Selena aside and threw himself at the fence.

He was planning to climb over so skillfully that the pretty, young girl would be eternally impressed. He figured that would salvage something from this miserable, lonely evening.

Selena *was* impressed, but not for the reason the man had hoped, because—

Pop!

That was the first thing Selena heard. The man's balloon popping.

Then she was backing away from the fence in total horror, her hand covering her mouth.

As hard as she tried, she couldn't turn her eyes away.

The man was burning to a crisp.

20

The Tunnel of Love

Greg was leading the way to the Tunnel of Love. Maxi kept an eye out for KC and Wendy, but there was no sign of them. She wasn't too worried. After all, she had the car keys.

Mitch Deever, who was working his way behind the row of game booths and keeping his eye on Maxi, wasn't too worried either. After all, he had the switchblade.

The Tunnel of Love was housed in a big, dark, square booth and was decorated with fake ferns and big, red hearts. The cars were boat-shaped, but ran on a track. Grinning broadly, Greg tapped Maxi on the back. "Here we go," he said with an attempt at a leer.

Maxi just stood there. She was feeling angry and awkward and embarrassed, and two out of the three emotions felt very alien to her. Then she saw the looks on both men's faces. Of course! They were more embarrassed than she was.

For the first time since they'd arrived at the carnival, she started to feel good.

"So, Greg," she said brightly. "What're you

waiting for? C'mon, guy. Let's go make nookie, suck face. C'monnn. Don't you want me?"

Greg kept smiling but his smile looked fake. And Graham's face was all twisted, as if someone were pinching his behind hard and he was trying not to let on.

Greg paid the carny. Maxi squeezed into the car next to him, sitting even closer than she had to. "Don't wait up, we'll be awhile," she told Graham with a big, cheery smile.

But the teacher was paying his ride tickets as well. As she and Greg watched in disbelief, he climbed into the car right behind theirs. He smiled when he saw them looking at him, and waved. What a jerk. At least he looked pretty ridiculous sitting all alone back there with his big Snoopy doll.

"That guy can't leave us alone for a minute," Greg muttered.

"Just ignore him," she told him as their car jerked forward.

At the entrance to the tunnel hung a flap of black rubber. The car pushed through the flap, disappearing into the darkness.

"Don't look back," she commanded Greg.

She smiled as Greg turned and faced straight forward. "Greg," she said, "You're supposed to look at *me*, silly."

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry!"

As it turned out, the Tunnel of Love wasn't really a tunnel. It was a large, dark room decorated with fake palms. A static-y soundtrack

played Hawaiian ukelele love songs over the loudspeakers while five or six cars meandered slowly around the track. There were new cars coming in and old cars leaving all the time. On the far side of the shed there was one other couple, groping wildly as their car wound behind a large stand of plastic ferns.

"Pretty sexy spot, huh?" Maxi asked in her sexiest voice.

Greg swallowed loudly. "Yeah."

She placed one hand gently against his damp neck. "So what are you so nervous about?"

"I'm not nervous."

"You look nervous."

"Well, I'm not."

"I thought you said I was too scared to come in here."

"Maxi, I just—I was so mad at that pond scum back there that I lost my head. I'm sorry. This was a crazy idea. You don't want to be here. I know that."

"What're you saying? That it's crazy to go through the Tunnel of Love with me?"

Greg looked pained. His eyes went black. "Maxi," he murmured. "Don't joke with me, I can't take it. You know how I feel. I've never felt anything like this before in my entire life. I swear to you, I feel like I'm bursting every time I look at you." He lowered his head, the words tumbling out. "I know I made a fool of myself playing that game with Mr. Newton, but I can't help it. The thought of some creepy old guy putting the moves

on you just makes me go berserk."

"Greg—" she began. But she didn't go on. She was strangely touched.

"Maxi, I know you think I'm crazy, pursuing you like this, but I feel like . . . like I know you. Really know you, know what I mean? I don't know, maybe it's the orphan thing. I know what it's like to feel alone, okay? And even though you always have friends around, I can tell you feel that too."

She started to turn away, mumbling, "You don't know what I feel—" But he grabbed her hand.

"I do know. I do know. I see how you look."

"How I look?"

"Maxi, whenever I see you, you've got the most amazing look on your face. Like you're really sad and bored and like you've seen everything and you're really lonely, all at the same time. And—and it just makes me want to be the one to cheer you up. I can make you smile, Maxi. I promise you. I can make you smile."

Maxi was already smiling. "You've got your soundtrack," she observed softly.

"Huh?" He was shaking now, he was so nervous.

"Corny music, just like in the movies."

"Oh. Y-yeah."

She could sense movement in the car behind them—Graham's car—but she didn't turn to look. Not even when she heard a strange gulping sound, like he was swallowing something the

wrong way. She kept her amber eyes firmly fastened on Greg. She reached out her long arms. She saw his eyes widen with shock as she pulled his head toward hers.

Thanks to the darkness, their foreheads bumped hard. She figured she'd pay for this kiss with a serious headache later. Not to mention how she'd pay the next time she tried to get out of going on a date with Greg.

But that was later, this was now. Her lips found his as she kissed him fiercely. She clung to him with all her might.

It was an endless kiss. And the whole time she and Greg were making out, she could feel that they were being watched. Could feel Graham's eyes boring into her from behind. Let him watch, she told herself. He could make out with his Snoopy doll for all she cared.

Actually, in the car behind them, Graham now lay with his head straight back and his mouth wide open, staring wide-eyed at the fake stars that were pasted to the roof of the Tunnel of Love. His arms hung limply around the Snoopy doll. His blood was quickly and brightly staining the dog's white fur.

Mitch had already climbed out of Graham's car. He was making his way through the fake ferns toward Maxi.

Maxi finally let Greg go. He just sat there, his jaw hanging down, his eyes glassy in the darkness. "Wow," he breathed. Then he threw his hands up in the air and whooped joyously.

"Thank you, God!" he yelled.

Maxi laughed. "Don't tell me you've never been kissed before."

"Not like that," he said with a huge grin. "Not by someone I—"

He couldn't speak. And the strange thing was, neither could she. Suddenly, she was feeling *it*, the thing everyone always talked about. Her heart was fluttering. Her blood pounded in her head so hard it roared in her ears. The guy had touched her soul.

This was crazy. She was a goner . . . and for who? For Greg Dillon! She needed to hold him. "Come here, you," she said, and she reached for him.

But as they went back into another kiss, Maxi suddenly saw—

Her father.

It was as if a trapdoor opened in her stomach and all the good feelings fell right out.

It was him all right. He was riding three cars ahead. She spotted him just as his car was pushing through the doors that led back outside. But she saw him distinctly. Bev too, with her mane of long, red hair like a horse's tail. Even as they rode out of the room, the older couple stayed locked in an embrace no less passionate than the one Maxi had just given Greg.

Maxi shoved Greg back hard, suddenly furious. She sat up straight. "I'll be right back!" She threw a leg out of the car.

"Hey! Where are you going? Maxi! Be careful!"

But even though Greg grabbed at her hand, and then at her leg, she managed to clamber quickly out of the moving car.

She was sort of surprised that Greg didn't shout for her to come back.

The truth was, he tried.

But that was the moment that Mitch slit his throat.

21

The Scrambler

Maxi tripped as she was coming out the door of the Tunnel of Love. She banged her shin against a pile of painted rocks that formed the ride's foundation. She fell hard. When she got up, she was cursing, and she cursed even louder when she saw she had ripped a big hole in the knee of her pants. She had also banged Wendy's camera underneath her as she fell. Probably broken it too, the way the night was going.

It was all her father's fault. Every last bit of it.

When she got up, she ran around to the front of the ride. She was in time to see her father and Bev strolling off hand-in-hand into the darkness. Cursing and limping, Maxi followed.

When she finally caught up to them, Dad and Bev were getting on another ride—the Scrambler.

Maxi started to run, the camera banging against her chest. The carny ride operator was already heading for his control booth, and she didn't have any ride tickets anyway, so she just

ran past him before he could see her and climbed into one of the cars.

Tunnel of Love or no Tunnel of Love, Dad and Bev were still smooching up a storm. Maxi wanted to scream. The only good thing about their kissing was that it meant they didn't see her. *Excellent*. She'd surprise them. And she'd take some candid snapshots to show Mom assuming the camera wasn't broken. Maxi's mother seemed to be the only one in Holloway who didn't believe the rumors about her father's affair. Or at least, so she claimed. Well thanks to these photos, she'd have to face what was going on, once and for all.

The Scrambler was large and creepy-looking, shaped sort of like a giant spider with eight legs. Hanging from the bottom of each leg was a different-colored car. Maxi was in the red car, her father and Bev were in the blue car. Soon the ride picked up speed, and all eight cars crisscrossed.

Dad and Bev were screaming now, shouting like happy schoolchildren as the Scrambler's cars careened faster and faster. They stopped screaming when they saw Maxi.

She waved to them and shouted the meanest things she could think of. It didn't matter. With the grinding of the Scrambler's gears, the rushing speed of the cars, and the blaring music of the ride, every word she screamed was drowned out. At least she could enjoy the shocked look on their faces.

Good, good, good, she thought bitterly. She slipped the annoying leather strap off her neck and started snapping pictures as fast as she could rewind. But her car was moving so fast now, she doubted she was getting anything except blur.

The Scrambler was a scary ride. Sometimes it looked like the cars were going to smash into each other. Other times it seemed certain the cars would break free and crash into the tall barbed-wired fence that bordered the fairgrounds.

Her dad seemed to have regained his composure. The next time their cars aimed right at each other, he took a hand off the safety bar and raised it in greeting. He was trying to smile, trying to act like this was just the most natural thing in the world, being caught cheating by your only daughter. Let him die, Maxi prayed. Let him die right now.

Crisscross. Crisscross. The cars were whizzing faster. The whine of the ride's gears was rising in pitch, higher and higher, till the noise was screeching in Maxi's ears. All at once, Maxi—who couldn't remember the last time she'd been scared on a ride—felt the first pangs of fear. Because the cars were coming closer together each time they crossed. And now when her car swung out toward the fence, she could almost touch the wire mesh.

Off to her left, two empty cars smacked together so hard that sparks and splinters flew in all directions.

There was no doubt left. The ride was totally out of control.

Maxi twisted around in her seat, looking toward the carny's booth. No ride operator in sight. She screamed anyway.

Bev and her father were yelling too. Yelling for help, probably. Maxi couldn't hear a thing. It just looked like Dad and Bev had their mouths wide open as—

Her father's car rushed right at the fence.

And this time the car didn't stop inches from the wire mesh. This time the car crashed right into it.

Maxi started yelling again, yelling with all her might.

Because as the red and blue cars crisscrossed once more, she saw that her father was slumped over the safety bar. So was Bev. Her dad's arm was hanging over the side of the car, too, so that when the two cars smashed into each other, his arm acted as a shock absorber for the blow. Mixed into the giant smashing noise, Maxi heard the tiny crunching sounds as her father's arm was crushed.

Then her own car—shaking wildly in all the wrong directions—flew off again and she couldn't see her father anymore. Except in her mind's eye, where she could vividly picture the wire mesh of burn marks she had seen across her father's face.

And now she was screaming as she had never screamed before. Not just with utter horror

but also with terrible guilt. She had wished her father dead—and it had happened!

Her car was careening toward the fence again, but this time she ducked down fast so that only the car and no part of her body banged into the metal. There was a cascade of sparks—tiny cuts in the darkness. She was still alive. She wished she wasn't. Because now she had to watch helplessly as—

Her father's car zoomed back toward the fence. This time the ride jammed Dad and Bev against the metal. And the car stuck there, holding them in place in a cloudburst of sparks and smoke.

Maxi couldn't look anymore.

The ride had stopped. An awful, acrid burning smell filled her nostrils. She climbed out, jumped down and ran toward her father as best she could on unsteady legs. Before she was halfway there, the smoke cleared enough for her to see her dad and the woman clearly. What was left of them.

Caught between car and fence, their bodies were being pushed through the hot wire links like hamburger meat. Their clothes were burning right off them. Their blood was spattering everywhere like grease from a hot skillet.

Maxi staggered back a few steps. Fell. The camera dropped.

There was another shower of sparks from the fence, bursting suddenly like fireworks. The fireworks felt like they were exploding inside her own brain.

She turned and ran toward the operator's control booth.

Inside, the carny was slumped over the controls. She couldn't speak; she just grabbed him and yanked him upright.

The man fell back again as soon as she let him go. Her hands were slick with the carny's blood.

Then she saw the red slash marks in the man's T-shirt. Many of the letters in the embossed words "Fantana's Fun House" had been cut out, leaving the message "Fa . . . t . . . e"

She was too stunned and horrified to scream. She couldn't breathe; her heart had frozen.

Then she turned around.

A man in a white mask stood right behind her.

He was about to plunge a knife into her chest.

22

The Strongman

The man held the knife high above Maxi as he eyed her through his mask. She could feel his awful, leering eyes undressing her. He began to chuckle.

He reached out with a tattooed hand, wiggling his forefinger like a snake. She shrank back so hard she smacked her head against the edge of the wooden control booth. The man's tattooed hand kept coming. It stroked her cheek. She turned her face away as hard as she could. But the man cupped her face with his hand, squeezing her cheeks together harshly so that she made a fish face. He laughed harder.

Then the man's tattooed hand let go of her and began traveling down. With pointed finger, he traced a line straight down her chest, as if marking the spot he would cut her.

She shoved the hand away and tried to run, but the man pressed forward, pinning her against the booth with his body. He was taller than she was. He lowered his head toward hers, bringing the mask up to her face. At least the white mask kept

his lips from touching hers, but his eyes were on her—those leering eyes. She felt his hot breath on her skin.

And then he dropped the knife, letting it clatter to the floor, and grabbed her lithe body with both hands.

She spat right into the eyeholes of the mask.

The man's head jerked back, his hands instinctively flying up to his eyes. And in that same instant, Maxi shoved the man with all her might. She was no match for him, but the surprise was just enough to knock him slightly off balance, and when he stepped back, he stepped on the foot of the fallen ride operator. The man in the mask fell, crashing backward into the booth.

Maxi didn't stick around to see what happened after that. She was running. Running flat-out through the deserted fairgrounds, screaming for help. If she had had even a split second to think about it, she would have realized the irony of the name she screamed for. She screamed, "*DADDY!!*"

She turned the next corner and saw, with wild relief, that she had found people. They were standing by the strongman's booth. It was that short, fat man she had seen at the fortune-teller's. He was yelling at the last few customers who were filing past him. "I'm telling you, the rides are safe! Come back here!" He swore. "You can't get out! I've got the gate locked. You can't get out unless I—"

Maxi had started screaming again. She was forcing the sound out of her mouth so hard she felt as if she were ripping out her vocal chords. That was all the customers needed. They started running for the exit. The man turned and glared at Maxi in disbelief, his tiny red eyes burning with anger.

"Crazy . . . man . . . killing . . . the rides . . . my dad . . ." Maxi couldn't get the words out. She was shaking all over with shock, pain, fear, and grief.

The man grabbed her shoulders and shook her even harder. "What's the matter with you?" he yelled. "Why would you scare off my customers like that?! Are you insane! You want to make me more broke than I already am?!"

Maxi was crying now. The man slapped her hard, as if that would snap her out of it. "I'M RUINED!" he shrieked at her. "YOU UNDERSTAND ME, GIRL? RUINED!"

Maxi stopped yelling. She stared at him in a daze. It was as if she were dead inside. She watched the man helplessly. There was a brutal scowl on his face as he raised his open palm to slap her again.

Then, just a few yards away, a bell rang so loudly that they both turned.

It was the bell from the strongman game. For a quarter, you walloped a little metal scale with a huge mallet. You tried to make the metal ball shoot all the way up and hit the bell. If you rang the bell, you won a stuffed animal. That's why

Vince Fantana was so surprised to hear that bell ring so loud and clear. You had to be incredibly strong to ring the bell. Almost all the customers who played the game just lost their quarter.

The man who had rung the bell had his back to them.

He hefted the huge mallet once more, raising the wooden hammer high overhead.

Then he turned and swung.

23

No Way Out

The blow from the mallet caught Vince Fantana flush in the head. There was a sickening, squishy thud, like the sound Maxi heard the time she dropped pumpkins off the highway overpass onto unsuspecting motorists.

The squat man crumpled soundlessly. Maxi didn't look to see whether the man was still alive. She was running again. And the man with the mallet was running after her.

She didn't see the girl until she was running alongside her. She almost jumped out of her skin when she felt her presence. Then she saw that it was the fortune-teller's daughter. The girl must have come out from between two booths.

Selena grabbed her arm and started pulling her toward an open door. Maxi vaguely recognized the place—it was the fortune-telling booth. Selena closed and latched the door behind them. They backed away from the door.

Almost at once, the door rattled violently as the man hurled himself against it. The latch

held. Clinging to each other, the girls backed away further as—

The first splintering blow struck, and they saw the big flathead of the mallet coming through the door.

Selena pulled Maxi hard as they plunged through the curtain and out through the booth's back door. Selena had her by the hand now, leading her quickly through the narrow maze of grass that led behind the booths. They hurdled over the low wall that surrounded the bumper car enclosure.

Though the ride was deserted, the cars were whizzing around like mad. One car bumped Maxi hard. She went down, smacking her head against the thick rubber mat. Selena grabbed her arm, helping her up. Then they both froze.

The snub-nosed metal cars were circling like sharks. The wires that connected them to their overhead power grid sparked wildly.

And then the man in the mask turned the corner, holding the huge mallet at his side. He stopped when he saw them. But only for a second. Then he started to run.

"C'MON!" Selena shrieked.

They raced on, keeping just ahead of the onrushing cars. The two girls vaulted over the far wall like Olympic hurdlers running neck and neck.

Up ahead, Maxi saw the wire fence. She ran toward it, but Selena practically tackled her from behind.

"No! It's electric! Don't touch it!"

Maxi's hand was inches from the fence. She could feel the heat coming off the wire mesh. The image of her father and Beverly flashed back through her—like a stake driven into her brain—and she realized that Selena was right.

"People have been trying to climb out, they're getting fried," Selena said, gulping for breath. "The whole thing's so red hot there are fires breaking out all over the place."

For the first time, Maxi realized that the darkness of the sky wasn't just the dark of night but the dark of smoke. And as they ran on, she started to smell it, inhale it. It was an awful, stinging smoke that burned her lungs as she took each desperate breath.

"We . . . can't get out?" she repeated numbly when they stopped again, gasping.

"No," Selena hissed, "and that . . . psychopath is going around killing everyone." The girl had a firm grip on Maxi's arm again and was pulling her—but where?

Wherever. Maxi followed.

Now that Maxi was looking for bodies, she spotted them everywhere. A father and son who had tried to climb over the fence were grilled like human waffles. Bodies were lying on the floor of the maniacally spinning carousel, lying beneath the gaping, bloody mouths of the horses. Their bodies looked as if they'd been torn apart by a creature with an animal rage.

In the distance, she saw a blond boy scream-

ing as he whooshed down the water slide. The slide was shaking wildly, and before the boy hit bottom his scream was cut off as—

The entire slide collapsed with a loud crash.

Maxi skidded to a halt, staring at the fallen ride in disbelief. The boy! She started toward the slide but Selena grabbed her. "This way!"

They ran between two booths. Selena looked both ways, held up her hand for silence. Then they stole out into the next lane.

Up ahead was the haunted fun house, the ride's shutter banging furiously. As they were slinking past the ride, Selena whispered fiercely, "Down!"

They hid behind the black car which sat outside the ride's front entrance.

"He's coming?" Maxi whispered.

Selena put a forefinger across her lips. She nodded her head to indicate where Mitch was standing.

He was just twenty yards away, one fist on his hip, the mallet slung over his shoulder like a batter waiting for his turn at the plate. He was staring straight at the fun house.

And then—

The two girls looked at each other with shared terror.

Because the amusement ride car, which was the only thing in between them and death, had started to move.

24

The House of Death

The car kept moving. Maxi and Selena moved along with it, letting the car lead them into the fun house.

As the car pushed through the double doors, Selena climbed into the black leather seat. Maxi climbed in alongside her.

The car swooped down violently into the darkness. Maxi had to cover her mouth to stifle a scream.

The car started climbing slowly upward, past painted horrors on the walls—skulls, goblins, and dismembered hands holding candles. Over the loud speaker a melodramatic voice intoned, "Welcome to the House of Death." The voice chuckled maniacally.

Ordinarily a ride like this would have bored her. Now it terrified her.

They reached the top of the rise, and the mechanical car turned right, leading them into a room filled with wax figures. Frankenstein, Dracula, Wolfman—Maxi had never seen such realistic wax figures in her life. Why, the wax

bodies looked as if they were dripping and wet and—

She heard a horrible squelching sound, like sticky footsteps. She turned back sharply, and God in Heaven if the Dracula statue didn't seem closer to her than it had a second ago.

Moving faster, the car rushed them into a room that was decorated with vampire bats, their wings mechanically flapping.

And then Maxi felt a man's fingers brush through her hair.

She started screaming. She kept screaming even as she realized the fingers were just furry strips of cloth that were hanging down from the ceiling.

Selena was holding on to her, trying to calm her down.

It was pretty hard to calm down while the bat chamber's soundtrack screeched fake bat sounds in her ears. And as the car raced out of the bat room, there was a whooshing sound—dark fluttering sounds that sounded an awful lot like real bats.

Sparks shot up as the car sharply turned the corner, pitching Maxi hard into Selena. Then she heard organ music. The little car banged through another set of doors as they entered a small, dark room that appeared to be decorated like a funeral chapel.

Maxi, who thought she was all screamed out, screamed again as she saw a large, black coffin opening. A skeleton popped out to grin at her. It

reached out its bony hand and grabbed the collar of her gray T-shirt. Only the force of the car whipping along the track broke the skeleton's iron grip. Her shirt ripped down the middle.

Then the mechanical figure who was playing the organ turned his white skeleton face right into hers. Smiling, the organ player reached out and grabbed her hair. Her head was jerked violently back. She felt hair ripping out by the roots as the car hurtled onward into the haunted darkness.

Screams of terror kept escaping from Maxi. Selena was screaming along with her, but she was shouting Maxi's name.

Maxi turned to stare at her dully. The girl's face was full of anger and determination. In her terror, it took Maxi a moment to focus and hear what the girl was shouting.

"It's not real! It's just a ride!" Selena hissed. "You've got to keep quiet. He'll hear us!"

And then Maxi saw him, his eyes gleaming green in the darkness.

Except that's all the eyes were—eyes floating all by themselves, just another part of the ride.

So was the dismembered hand that caressed her cheek as . . .

Maxi kept telling herself that Selena was right, she was just imagining things as—

The car took another sharp turn, sending up a shower of sparks that singed what was left of Maxi's beautiful dark hair. They stopped short

in front of a fun house mirror. In the mirror, their faces, which were already distorted with terror, were distorted even more, becoming grotesquely long. And then a sea of red, blobby ghouls appeared in the mirror, hovering right behind Maxi's back.

Not real! she shouted at herself. Not real!

But as the car jolted forward, she could feel the red goo dripping from her neck where the ghouls had touched her.

They flew into the next room, and Maxi caught a speeding glimpse of the various torture methods on display here. Papier-mâché figures groaned and screamed silently as they were stretched out on racks or pressed to death under piles of rocks. But that wasn't what caught Maxi's eye . . .

She had always prided herself on being a daredevil. It was now or never. Despite the terrible speed of the car, she suddenly stood.

Selena, yelling, grabbed her waist, but Maxi didn't look down. She kept her eyes on the wall as they rushed by, and at the moment they came closest to the wall she leaned way out.

She was about to fall. With one hand she grabbed a hold of one of the antique axes hanging there. The car swung right, and Maxi and Selena both fell back into the car, but—

Maxi held onto the ax's wooden handle. There was a crash as the ax blade smashed down hard onto the floor. Reaching out with her other hand, she was able to lift the weapon into the car.

They whooshed out of the room. It was an old-fashioned ax, she now saw, with two large symmetrical blades that faced in opposite directions—the kind of ax you saw in movies about knights and castles.

Selena was shaking her, whispering, "Yes! Yes!" as their car twisted left. "Good going!" With a horrible jolt, they banged through another set of doors and. . . .

Crashed to a halt.

Sudden silence attacked them. Maxi looked around, every sense keen. She heard the steady drip-drip-drip of the water torture display in the room they had just left, and in the far distance, the faint organ-grinder muzak of the fairgrounds, still playing cheerfully. She smelled dust, rot, and plaster. More importantly, she smelled sweat and blood.

As her eyes adjusted to the room's deeper darkness, she recognized the statues of many familiar figures. Jack the Ripper was holding a disemboweled woman in his arms. The Boston Strangler had another victim at his feet.

Under the guillotine, Marie Antionette waited, her pretty neck bared. That neck looked so real. Maxi could almost see her carotid artery pulsing as the woman waited for the blade to fall.

Selena and Maxi both climbed carefully out of the car. Selena took a few tentative steps forward into the dark room. Behind her, Maxi clutched the huge ax in her hands like a baseball bat. It was so heavy she wasn't sure she

could swing it. "Where are we?" she whispered to Selena.

"You're in the Chamber of Horrors," a voice answered, whispering right in her ear.

25

The Chamber of Horrors

Maxi jumped straight up into the air.

When she saw what was behind her, she jumped a second time.

But it was only a statue of Lizzie Borden, the famous ax-murderess, gazing at her with painted eyes. The statue held an ax above her head. So Maxi must have just imagined that she heard the statue whisp—

The statue blinked.

Maxi backed away, terrified all over again. Selena tried to grab her as she went by, but she pulled free. Maybe Selena was right. Maybe Maxi was going crazy. It didn't matter to her. All she knew was that she had to get away from the statue of Lizzie Borden.

Then she saw the strange look on Selena's face.

At the same instant, Maxi felt the man grab her from behind.

His arms were like taut ropes that squeezed the breath right out of her. Twisting and struggling, she caught only glimpses of her attacker,

saw the man's white mask as he dragged her violently across the room and—

Wham! He slammed her up against the wall.

It felt as if her entire body had locked into one solid mass of hurt. Whatever breath she had left, he had totally knocked it out of her.

But even in this shocked, numb state she could feel one of the man's large tattooed hands as it roamed freely over her body.

She dropped the ax. Selena was running forward. She crouched down and grabbed the wooden handle of the fallen weapon. But before she could lift it, the man in the mask stomped one big boot down onto the wide, thin, silver blade. He let go of Maxi, letting her slump down along the wall.

The man was holding something behind his back. In her dazed state, Maxi couldn't make out what it was. Selena was still struggling with the handle of the weapon, trying to pry the blade out from under the man's boot. She had almost gotten the ax free when the man in the mask kicked out wildly, catching Selena right in the ribs.

With a low groan, Selena fell backward. The man marched forward. He started kicking her again and again. He was chuckling. Each time he let the girl get up on all fours before he let loose with the next blow.

When he tired of this game, he took out the weapon he was holding behind his back. It was a weapon he had brought along from the torture chamber—the cat-o'-nine-tails. He cracked the

whip. The jagged pieces of metal at the ends of the nine thongs caught Selena in the legs, the arms, the face. She tried to dodge the blows, but the whips snapped like an angry nest of vipers, and with each lashing, at least half the tails hit home.

Her breath back at last, Maxi charged forward. Before he could lash Selena again, she seized the man's hand.

The man didn't even turn, just flung her aside. She tried to hold on to him with both hands, tried to pull the whip from his grasp. But instead she caught only one strand of rope. So that as the man lashed Selena again, the jagged metal raked through Maxi's palms. She screamed, staring down at her hands in horror. Then the man turned and flicked the whip right at her. She felt the blows—nine knives—all landing. She went down.

Selena, too, lay in a bleeding heap. The man stomped over to her and holding her by the collar of her blouse, dragged her over to the guillotine. He pulled her up to a sitting position. Then, yanking her dark bun of hair as if it were a handle, he threaded her head through the guillotine's wooden hole. He positioned her neck right under the path of the blade.

She was lying right on top of the statue of Marie Antoinette. The force of Selena's weight caused the statue's arms to rise in the air, so that it looked like the statue was giving Selena a hug—or holding her in place for her execution.

Maxi struggled to her feet. Charged. With bleeding hands she flailed helplessly at the powerful man.

He didn't seem to feel the blows.

He pulled the cord to release the guillotine's huge, sharp blade.

It hurtled down toward Selena's bare neck.

26

The Guillotine

Selena was screaming. So was Maxi, as the shiny blade stopped short, just inches from Selena's throat.

The blade had jammed.

The man in the mask quickly pushed down on the blade with both hands. It jerked downward another inch. But it went down crooked. On one side the blade was now jammed even deeper into the wood. On the other side, the razor was kissing Selena's goose-pimpled skin.

As the man struggled to push down the blade the rest of the way, Maxi remembered the ax. She raced across the room. It took all her strength to lift the heavy weapon. The wooden handle slipped in the blood flowing freely from her palms.

She staggered toward the man as he bent over the guillotine, working feverishly on the jammed blade. She raised the silver ax over her head. And then the ax began to fall.

The blade sliced into the back of the man's head, sticking out like a knife buried to the hilt in a melon. He fell forward. Onto the guillotine.

Selena screamed. His weight had brought the blade down another fraction of an inch, just enough for Selena to feel the steel begin to cut her.

"Off! Off!" Selena was yelling through clenched teeth. Maxi grabbed the man's T-shirt, but the flimsy cloth ripped away in her bloody grasp. The man fell back again. And this time Selena didn't even scream.

Maxi buried her fingers in the man's greasy hair, gripping the locks. She managed to pull the man off the guillotine, letting him drop to the floor at her feet. Even as he fell, the hands of his dead body seemed to cling to her, groping for her, trying to pull her down along with him.

She went to work, desperately trying to inch the blade up and off Selena's neck. Selena was crying now, silent tears leaking out her eyes and running down the sides of her face. Those eyes, locked on Maxi's, begged her to hurry.

There was a snapping sound as the blade jerked upward. Selena was free.

But just barely. Maxi helped her ease her head back out of the wooden hole. There was so little room that the blade scraped Selena's chin, then her nose, drawing fresh blood. Maxi helped Selena sit up. The girl had a string of red beads across her neck like a necklace of blood. She was crying loudly now, horrible, hiccupping sobs. It was Maxi's turn to comfort her, wrapping her in an embrace. "You're okay!" she yelled. "You're okay!" She

found she couldn't talk more softly than a shout.

As she hugged Selena, Maxi looked down, past the guillotine, down into the metal bucket that lay on the floor, ready to catch Marie Antoinette's chopped-off head.

The bucket was full. KC's blond head lay in the rusty metal bottom, staring up at her, her eyes bugged out with terror.

Shrieking wildly, Maxi tottered backward. She kept raising and lowering her bleeding hands as if to cover her face.

"Maxi—Maxi!" Selena was shouting at her. "C'mon—we've got to get out of here. Maxi!"

Selena pulled Maxi's arm, dragging her away from the guillotine, away from the dead man on the floor.

Leaning against each other, the two girls started following the metal track that led out of the room. There was a loud rumbling. They jumped to the side of the track just in time to avoid an empty car whizzing by in a frenzy. Maxi thought she felt the floor shaking.

Then the statue of Jack the Ripper caught her eye.

The statue's eyes were gleaming coldly in the darkness. His hand, the hand that held the straight-edge razor, moved ever so slightly. His dusty lips twitched upward in a smile.

Movement to her left. Maxi's head spun. Just in time to see Marie Antoinette sitting up by the guillotine. Also smiling.

Then the disemboweled woman who lay at Jack the Ripper's feet began to rise.

So did the woman with the horribly blue face whom the Boston Strangler had strangled.

But where was the Boston Strangler himself?

27

The D-Word

The Boston Strangler's hands were dry as dust as they clamped down on Maxi's windpipe. She felt herself falling backward into his arms. The statue stood in the middle of the track, choking her with a vicious frenzy. Selena was punching him and kicking him, but it was no use.

He was going to choke Maxi to death.

He would have done it, too, except just then the next fun-house car zoomed by on the track and ran right into the back of the Strangler's knees. He fell hard, dragging Maxi down with him. The car was right on top of him, its wheels spinning as it struggled to move forward. The car was grinding his legs into white powder.

Selena dragged Maxi out of the killer's grasp.

But now the statues were all coming fast, their dusty mouths grinning hideously. Coughing and gasping for air, Maxi held on to Selena as they hobbled down the track toward the exit. They banged out through the double doors.

Outside, the smoky air felt like pure oxygen after the dust and terror of the fun house. They

kept running, Maxi looking back over her shoulder, expecting at any moment to see the fun house statues lurching toward them.

No one followed.

Maxi was no longer looking back when the black cloud of vampire bats emerged from the fun house door.

The bats flew off in jagged circles. One large bat, his head streaked with white where the artist had missed a spot, was leading the rest. Luckily for Maxi and Selena, this large bat led the flock high into the night sky. The screeching of the bats grew fainter and fainter. The bats were gone.

When they could run no more, Maxi and Selena collapsed onto the grass in the middle of the fairgrounds, gasping for air. The fairgrounds were brighter than before. It took Maxi a moment to figure out why. All the rides were going at once. The Ferris wheel was whirling, the carousel spinning. On the roller coaster, the empty cars were flying around the tracks at blurring speed. Even the organ-grinder muzak was going faster and faster. Cutting through the music was the high-pitched grinding of gears. To Maxi, it sounded as if the grinding rides were screeching out a single word over and over:

Jason . . . Jason . . . Jason . . .

That wasn't all. The Scrambler was on fire. So was the Tunnel of Love.

Selena was bleeding pretty badly, Maxi saw. So was she. But she didn't feel any pain. Her

brain was screaming louder than her body. They had to get out!

She managed to get to her feet. Her breath hadn't slowed. Her horror was growing. And suddenly, it was all too much for her as the realization struck full force. "My friends!" she gasped. "My friends!"

She couldn't say it, could barely even think it. But still somehow she knew.

All her friends were dead.

She was crying, holding her bleeding hands up near her face. Her salty tears dropped into the gashes in her palms and each drop stung like a lash. "It's my fault! I let them down. I . . . I abandoned them!"

With a groan, Selena worked her way to her feet. She was crying, too. She reached out a hand to Maxi. But Maxi was bleeding in so many places, she didn't dare touch her. "Don't be crazy. It's not your fault!"

"Oh yes—yes it is!" Maxi's whole face squinched together violently. "Oh God! Oh God! My daddy!"

She couldn't stop sobbing. It was as if her wounds had opened up holes inside her and her feelings were flooding out. There was no stopping them. "I—loved him," she wept.

But it was no use saying that now. Too late! Too late to try to get along with her father. Too late to be kind to her mother. Too late to be good to her friends. She had craved her father's attention so badly. Well, she had gotten some attention all right. The wrong kind.

Selena rested a hand gently on Maxi's shoulder. "This way," she said. But the truth was, she had no idea which way to turn. And after the two girls had wandered a few yards, Selena stopped. Her head dropped. She too was weeping. "I . . . I should have warned you!"

Maxi could barely hear what the girl was saying. "What?"

"The tarot cards! I lied! The cards showed . . . they showed that you and your friends would die tonight. I should have warned you! That's what the cards were saying. Don't you see? I never got such a strong message in my life."

Still weeping, Maxi made a gesture of dismissal with her wounded hand. "It wasn't your fault. It was mine."

"No, no!"

"Yes, it was!" Maxi shouted. She was shaking. She snuffled uselessly. Her nose was running as freely as her eyes. And then suddenly she was laughing hysterically, and the laughter was almost indistinguishable from her sobs. "Hey," she said, "you don't really believe in those cards, do you?"

Selena nodded, her eyes shiny with grief.

Maxi grinned through her tears. "Then how come I'm still alive? Huh? Answer me that!" She felt an angry triumph surging through her. "Huh? Answer me! How come I'm still here?"

The answer came bounding toward her.

It was Mitch's snarling rottweiler, Stump, racing out of the shadows.

28

Stump

Maxi turned in time to see the dog hurtling toward her like a flying shadow. Lunging, the beast knocked her to the ground. It sank its sharp teeth deep into her slender throat.

She tried to raise one arm to protect herself but the dog knocked it aside with a shake of his big head. And now the sharp teeth were coming down again . . . and again. . . .

Selena was screaming and kicking and pulling at the dog, but it was useless. He was chomping away on the girl. With his massive, powerful jaws, he tossed Maxi from side to side like a rag doll.

"MAXI!" Selena was screaming. "MAXI!" As if somehow the girl could do something to defend herself.

Selena heard flesh ripping, bones crunching. And long after Maxi had stopped moving, the dog kept attacking. As if even Maxi's death didn't satisfy the animal.

Selena was kicking the dog, screaming at it, crying at it. She tried to drag Maxi's body away

from its grasp, but the girl's thin arm came off in her hands.

Selena's cries were silent now, her mouth open wide as if in a death grimace. She backed away. She was still holding the bloody arm.

Stump finally gave up chewing on Maxi's dead body. He looked up at Selena.

She staggered backward a few more steps, lost her balance, righted herself. She kept edging slowly away. She was still holding Maxi's arm, like some grisly souvenir she had won at the carnival.

The dog didn't follow her. Just stared, his eyes gleaming with hate. He was drooling blood.

The snarling creature was out for vengeance for his dead master, Selena realized.

And he wasn't done yet.

She kept backing up, further and further. Toward what? Sooner or later she would hit the . . .

She turned. She was about a foot from the electric fence. The wire mesh glowed bright orange, like the coils on a range when you set them on high. She could feel the heat baking the backs of her bare legs.

She knelt down, holding the poor girl's severed arm out toward the dog. "Here, Stump," she called softly. She whistled. "Here, boy. Fetch."

She waved the arm from side to side, so that Maxi's hand waved hello at the dog. The dog raised his head, his ears straightening. His jaws worked as he licked his chops.

"C'mon, Stump. I've got a treat for you . . ."

Suddenly, the big dog charged. Selena waved the arm in big strokes now. She wanted to be sure the dog kept his eyes on the prize.

He was about ten yards away, and coming fast. She turned and tossed the arm high in the air, right along the fence.

The dog charged forward and expertly caught Maxi's wrist in his mouth.

His momentum took him right into the fence.

29

Fireworks

Selena didn't look back. As she staggered away, she heard a few tiny yips. Then the burning and sizzling sounds were loud in her ears.

She was shuddering violently. She looked down. The ground was rumbling as if before an earthquake. She started to run.

The flames from the burning rides were licking higher and higher. Soon they would spread to the surrounding woods. Despite the searing pain of her many cuts, Selena ran faster.

As she ran, clouds of black smoke snaked toward her like malevolent ghosts. She was choking. There was a horrible wrenching sound, followed by a thunderous whirring. She looked up in time to dodge out of the way of the massive Cyclatron. Spinning furiously, the ride had ripped right off its mooring. It travelled about twenty yards down the grassy lane before it tipped to one side and smashed down onto a game booth, crushing it flat.

Selena ran on.

The broken heap of the water slide was one of

the few rides that wasn't burning. Thin streams of water geysered uselessly over the heap of ride parts. Clouds of steam hissed off the hot metal.

Near the water slide was a tree. Selena climbed it, her bloody limbs scraping in agony against the rough bark. The tree was close enough to the red-hot fence for her to jump over it.

And as she limped away through the woods, the Fourth of July fireworks started exploding over Crystal Lake.

There were fireworks back at the fairgrounds as well. The Scrambler was the first ride to explode, huge twisted pieces of metal flying everywhere like giant shrapnel. The Monster blew next.

When she heard the first explosion, Selena collapsed against a tree in terror, sure she had just been blown to bits. The light and heat rising from the carnival made the colorful explosions over the lake seem like so many firecrackers. She ran.

And kept running, until the booming blasts from the fairgrounds no longer threatened to blow out her eardrums.

She had made it. She was safe.

Meanwhile, back in the Chamber of Horrors, the statues were working furiously to revive the dead body of Mitch Deever. First Jack the Ripper slit open Mitch's tattooed chest with his razor. Then the disemboweled woman placed her own slimy, beating heart inside Mitch's chest, trying to attach the organ to the major veins and arteries.

It was a wasted effort. Because the fun house was burning out of control now and—

B O O O O M!!

A huge explosion ripped through the room.

The blast sent bits of plaster bodies flying everywhere. It blew the white hockey mask right off Mitch's head. As the flimsy building splintered in all directions, the white mask went hurtling upward.

The force of the explosion whipped the mask high over the electric fence . . .

Right out of the fairgrounds . . .

Spinning like a top . . .

Until at last the white mask thwacked deep into the core of a large, old oak tree in the nearby woods.

Smoke curled out of the gash in the bark as the mask burned and sizzled its way deep into the tree's core.

Then the smoke faded.

Despite the efforts of local firefighters, the Fantana Travelling Fun House and Carnival burned through the night. But the fire never reached the old oak tree where the white mask lay.

Jason's mask was buried, out of sight.

Other than Selena's escape, it was probably the only good thing that happened that whole awful r ight.

For now there was no way for the mask to work its evil, ever again.

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